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Fat Girls: Sexuality, Transgression, and Fatness in Popular Culture

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Fat Girls: Sexuality, Transgression, and Fatness in Popular Culture

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DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Fat Girls: Sexuality, Transgression, and Fatness in Popular Culture

This dissertation focuses on representations, histories, and personal accounts of fat women's bodies and sexualities. I address stereotypes and representations of fat women's sexuality in popular culture, including film, advertising, television, and literature. Through this examination, I move beyond one-dimensional representations of fat women's sexualities to a more complex, nuanced understanding of the realities of being fat, sexual, and a woman today. Fat women are often represented as either sexless, miserable, and lonely, or alternately, hypersexual and sexually deviant, with the inability to control their appetites for both food and sex. (see Bordo, Gilman, Farrell, Shaw, Wolf) By parsing through histories of fat representation, I show that these stereotypes can be quite harmful to fat women; they also fail to represent the nuances and contradictions of fat women's sexual experience and sexual self-image. The project is hybrid style: I include narratives from my own life, as I am a fat women also dealing with these issues. I examine experiences of girlhood in this cultural climate of anti-fatness, as well as images and representations of fat beauty. I close by thinking about efforts to "normalize" fat bodies in popular culture and their impact.

KEYWORDS: Fat, feminism, sexuality, popular culture, beauty, women.

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12/6/2018

Date

Fat Girls: Sexuality, Transgression, and Fatness in Popular Culture

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DEDICATION

To Jack and Stella, the loves of my life.

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I used to like walking. I liked to see where my feet would take me, and what I could discover in the world. Slowly, over some years, I became more and more unwilling to go outside, to take walks, to grab my dog and head for the park. My husband asked me one day, after many rebuffed offers to join him in the evening after work: "Why don't you ever want to take walks anymore?" I realized I had become anxious at the very thought of going outside. Wondering why, I tried to pinpoint when it started. I retraced my steps, mulling over the years of street harassment I (and most women on the planet) faced, having things thrown at me by men - everything from soda cans to coins, to food - pondering the offers from men that they would gladly "put it up my butt" and the tongue-rolling and air-humping that all added up to an incredible amount of unwanted attention.

Then, I started to think about a change, a shift in this attention, right around the time I went from chubby to obviously fat - an important progression in the eyes of the men who thought they owned my body as soon as my front door clicked shut and I stepped outside. This change in the way men looked at me tectonically shook the way I interact with the outside world. All of a sudden, I was no longer the type of woman they wanted to bang. I had crossed the line from fuckable to un-fuckable, and apparently there was no turning back. Now I was subjected to yells of "fat pig!" and "ugly cow!" and "bitch, eat a carrot!" instead of the usual jerk-off motion to which I was accustomed. Amazingly - and sadly - I felt deeply insulted that these street harassers were no longer interested in me. I felt like less of a woman, less attractive, less of *everything* I was supposed to be. I felt like I was failing at my job, and in a sense, I was. In a society

dominated by men, women are often told that their main purpose in life is to be eye candy. Fat activist and writer Kate Harding explains,

> Women's first - if not only - job is to be attractive to men. Never mind straight women who have other priorities or queer women who don't *want* men. If you were born with a vagina, your primary obligation from the onset of adolescence and well into adulthood will be to make yourself pretty for heterosexual men's pleasure. Not even just the ones you'd actually want to have a conversation with, let alone sex with - *all* of them. (Harding 2008, 68)

I was not performing womanhood correctly; I was not eye candy for the men who passed by me on the street. And they let me know, quickly and nearly unanimously, that this was unacceptable.

So I started to stay home more. I became more and more anxious about going out into the world. I started to drive my car short distances, to places where I could easily walk. I was, and am, afraid. My body is incredibly vulnerable when I walk outside, especially alone. So I stay home. Judith Moore, in her memoir *Fat Girl*, says "When you are fat, you are fat every day. But you do not feel fat every day. And yet you are surprised that everyone sees you as fat. Every time you feel pretty, the spell is broken, either you see yourself in a mirror or some boy screams 'Pig Face' or a pretty girl looks at you and then looks away and you see sadness in her eyes or you see disgust and dismay." (Moore 2005, 125) The ways we understand our physical selves are mediated by our interactions in public. If we create friction with the norm, rubbing like sandpaper against the status quo, acting as an affront to the ways we are supposed to be - in this case, thin - we encounter these kinds of snags in public space. Those around us become enforcers of the norm, and with every "pig face!" and "fat cow!", those enforcers break down any illusion we may have about our public acceptability. So, some of us retreat. We spend time away from the watchful eyes of a public that does not approve of us.

In what follows, I will provide the following: the remainder of this chapter contains examples of what it is like to live as a fat woman in the United States. I use memoir and other personal testimonies from fat women regarding their experiences. I include these examples of experiences here, at the outset, in order to "center" fat women's experiences in this dissertation. In the next chapter, I place my work in the context of other theorists, particularly feminists who theorize about the meanings conveyed by the body. I position my work as integrally connected to theirs, although they do not always focus on fat women specifically.

In the third chapter, I introduce two archetypes that, as I see it, dominate popular representations of fat women. As archetypes, they do not encompass the full humanity and complexity of fat women's lives, thus contributing to unhelpful stereotypes about the ways fat women live. One is: the sad, lonely fat girl who sits at home, eating her sorrows, with no friends or lovers. The second archetype is the hypersexual fat girl, voracious in her appetites and delusional about her sex appeal. I identify popular culture artifacts in which these archetypes are present, and I analyze their content.

In the fourth chapter, I look for past and present examples of fat beauty. Were there times in which fatness was celebrated, or considered beautiful? I examine the cultural norms which change the meanings conveyed by the fat body in order to understand how, why, and when fatness is stigmatized.

In the fifth chapter, I explore the challenges associated with normalizing fat women's bodies. I look at film and television in which stories about fat girls are a little different, and do not fall into the archetypical tropes I develop in chapter three. But with

change comes challenge, and I discuss some of the ways this holds true for fat women's popular representations.

My aim in this dissertation is to deconstruct degrading narratives about fat girls and women. Because these narratives can influence the ways we learn about and come to understand ourselves, I dedicate what follows to understanding how these narratives function and what they look like. Without this kind of deconstructive analysis, these archetypes and tropes continue to dominate our popular culture representations of fat girls and women, and continue to wreak havoc on our self-image.

In *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, Mona Awad crafts thirteen tales of what it feels like to live in a fat girl's body, for better and for worse. The text is classified as fiction, but any fat girl can recognize the deep truths in Awad's work. In "Your Biggest Fan", she tells the story of Rob and his fat girl side chick, the one he visits late at night after he's had too much to drink. She's always there, always waiting anxiously to hear from him, and always available. Awad opens the story,

> You've just polished off a mickey of vodka, seven kamikazes, and six dirty mothers. It's getting to be around that time of night, that hour when you feel you ought to call your biggest fan...Christ, what's the fat girl's name again? Liz? Liza? Eliza? Something -iza, maybe. The point is even though it's Friday night and very, very late, you know she'll be home. The fat girl is always home. (Awad 2016, 12)

Let me emphasize that last part: *the fat girl is always home.* You know this, and I know this. The fat girl does not have the luxury of date nights on the town - no drinks and dancing for her. She must tread lightly, and not ask for too much. When fat women do take up public space, we must apologize, profusely. There are certain instances when we can exist in public without attracting the glares, the looks of disgust, the rolling eyes from those with considerably less heft to carry around. There are mediating factors, of course; differences in race, class, and ethnicity play important roles in this equation. I will

address these further in this project. However, there remain ideas about the "fat girl" in culture that persist, and shape how we think about her. When the fat girl is in public, she garners specific reactions that thin women do not.

When we are exercising, for example, we get pats on the back and commendations for our obvious attempts to reduce our size. In her lifestyle blog *WitWitWoo*, blogger Kate Sutton tells the story of a particularly grueling bike ride in her post "Exercising in Public as a Fat Woman - What It's Really Like." She says,

> Anyway, as I approached the first junction on the left of me, a jeep type vehicle pulled up with a guy probably my age driving it. He was on his own, the window was down, and I wasn't sure whether he would try and nip out in front of me, especially as I was going so slow, or whether he was going to say something 'amusing' that would piss me off and make me want to throw my bike at his head. But instead, waited patiently for me to pass, and then called out of his window: "Keep going love, you're doing really well!"[1]

A slimmer woman might take such a comment as demeaning. Sutton, however, feels her efforts are being appreciated. She goes on to explain how she knew the remark was not meant in jest, or an attempt at sarcasm; she says she knows the words were meant in earnest. These words of support inspire her, and she continues, "So the point of this post is to say that you, and I, need to stop listening to that internal negative voice that tells us we look fat and stupid when we exercise. People don't think that. Most people look on in admiration at us trying to better ourselves." (*WitWitWoo)* Sutton's interpretation of the driver's words is important. She assumes he has no ill intent, and she may be right.

However, the exchange confirms what feminists have claimed for decades, and what most women know from personal experience: women's bodies are public property. Our bodies are discussed freely by politicians, men on the street, and friends and

[1] see http://witwitwoo.com/2016/07/29/exercising-in-public-as-a-fat-woman-what-its-really-like/

strangers alike. For fat women, however, this dynamic magnifies, it becomes more fraught and intense because of our size. What Sutton experiences here, although seemingly benign, is particular to fat women's experience in public space. Do random strangers on the street "cheer on" thin women as they ride their bicycles up steep hills? How about a man shouting to another man, "Keep going, buddy, you're doing great!" out of a moving vehicle? It's possible. But I find this less likely to occur than what Sutton experienced, because those bodies do not need improvement in the way that fat women's bodies do, according to popular wisdom. We come to expect a running commentary about our bodies, so comments like the one from this random driver seem preferable, especially in contrast to other kinds of attention we receive. Roxane Gay, in her memoir *Hunger,* recounts her experiences at the gym and says,

> I hate how other people will see me, this fat person working out, and offer unsolicited encouragement like, 'Good for you' or 'Keep it up' or 'You go, girl." I don't want encouragement. I am not interested in anyone's opinions about my presence in the gym. I do not require the affirmation of strangers. Those affirmations are rarely about genuine encouragement or kindness. They are an expression of the fear of unruly bodies. They are a misguided attempt to reward the behavior of a 'good fat person' who is, in their minds, trying to lose weight rather than simply engaging in healthful behavior. (Gay 2017, 165)

Being supported for fighting against fat is certainly preferably to being dismissed as sexually repulsive. "You're too fat to fuck." With this line, Judith Moore opens her memoir *Fat Girl*, a collection of stories from her childhood, chronicling the abuse she faced throughout her lifetime because she was fat. She continues, "I was eating dinner with a fellow I liked. I shouldn't have liked him but I did." (Moore 2005, 5) Who among us has not pined for someone who did not want us, who in the end just did not like us *that way*? It's not a difficult thing to imagine or remember. However, there is a unique and painful reality for fat girls and women who experience the sting of unrequited love

because our fat is often considered unfeminine and unattractive, so we have even more hoops to jump through when trying to find love and affection.

Sometimes, those we admire do not even think of us as sexual beings at all, and with popular culture reinforcing that message (as I'll discuss later), we begin to think of ourselves that way: we stifle our own desire, believing ourselves undeserving of intimacy, of kisses, of orgasms, of anything resembling romantic love. We often learn that our bodies are not considered desirable at a very young age, perhaps before we are even thinking about sex. I was told, during the fourth grade, by a little boy named Riley, after being pushed up against the wall away from the eyes of the bored recess monitor that he was going to rape me and I should feel lucky because I was so fat and ugly. I was nine. In hindsight, I can see how this kind of treatment engenders a very specific kind of social and sexual reality. The ways I began to understand my body and my burgeoning sexuality cannot be removed from incidents like the one I had with Riley. In the aptly titled essay "2Fat2Fuck," Rachel Kacenjar describes a similar moment. She is twelve years old at the time and curious about sex. She turns to her brother for advice.

> After school one day during the commercial break of *Seinfeld* episode, I turned to [my brother] and asked, "How do you know if it's the right time to have sex?" "Why do you want to know?" he snarked. I looked down at my Sketchers, scared, awkward, seeking compassion. "Don't worry about it now, Rachel," he said. I looked at him, seeking. "You're too fat to fuck anyway."

What does this kind of comment do to a young woman at an age when she is already vulnerable and seeking men's approval? How does this type of interaction color the ways she will understand and play out sexual encounters in her future? An essential part of this forced asexuality is that we are told that we are "too fat to fuck" often before we even begin having sex. We are shown, through omission or derision, the ways in which fat people can and cannot behave when it comes to romantic love.

If we, as fat people and particularly fat women, rarely or never see cultural examples of fat women in love, flourishing, succeeding - how can we envision our own happiness? Instead, if we see pain, struggle, eating disorders and self-hatred, we know, gathering from cultural examples, what our future holds. For an example, when I was fourteen, I was obsessed with the film *Titanic*. I was a sucker for a grand love story. Leonardo DiCaprio was the young girl's effeminate heartthrob of the moment, and I, like my friends and millions of girls spanning the continents, loved Leo and his devil-may-care character, Jack Dawson. I went to the movie theater at least five times to see it on the big screen with my girlfriends, and we sighed and wept at the tragedy of lost love and sinking ocean liners.

The female lead, Kate Winslet, fascinated me. Unlike the other blonde, rail-thin, bone-jutting film stars who were popular during my adolescence, Kate's body had some substance - she looked much more like a "real woman" than those other famous women I hated for their natural or unnatural physiques. Kate was (and is[2]) remarkably beautiful, yes. But she looked like she ate once in awhile, and made me feel much less alienated in my chubby, teenaged body I hated so much. In the film, you could see a bit of arm fat when she put her hands above her head. Her jaw line was less defined, less sculpted, than the actresses and models who dominated the "heroin-chic" scene which was popular during the 90s.

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2 It's worth mentioning that since her role in Titanic, Winslet has lost a considerable amount of weight. It seems as though sustained success for women (and sometimes men) in Hollywood is contingent on losing weight. The same can be said about other stars - for example, Roseanne Barr, America Ferrera, Gabourey Sidibe, and so on. It's crushing to watch your role models disappear, quite literally.

She made me feel like I could have a love story of my own, hopefully without all the death and destruction of *Titanic*. Sometime after the film's release, she was featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. I picked it up from the local Barnes and Noble, my connection to the world outside suburban and rural America. I can recall the cover so well, even now: Kate is in a boat, lying down: submissive, inviting, supple. I frantically flipped to the interview section, searching for myself in her words, hoping for some validation in her success. What I got was much more disappointing.

She bemoans being 5 feet 6 inches and weighing 185 pounds, and makes it clear that her success was only possible once she lost weight. I was crushed by this, knowing her unacceptable height and weight was quite normal for me, even enviable. Adding insult to injury, the article describes her nicknames: Blubber, at one point, and the name given to her by James Cameron, the director of *Titanic*: Kate-Weighs-a-Lot. It's such a silly name, such an immature thing for a grown man to say to a young woman. But it confirmed my worst fears. Even someone so stunning and brilliant, co-star to the young man who frequented my teenaged masturbatory fantasies, the woman who starred in the definitive pop-culture love story of my generation - even she could not escape the reality of her chubby body. Even she could not dodge the names, the teasing, the derision that we fat women are so accustomed to as we grow, and grow up.

This kind of thing happened over and over again to me as a child and adolescent, as I searched and searched for women who I could look up to, who could guide me in some way. I never really got any thinner, and I saw no path for women who stayed fat aside from misery and loneliness. All I saw was fat women villainesses and basket cases. I never saw a well-adjusted, loved, reasonable fat woman in the cultural iconography

available to me. This made it difficult for me to have functional, reciprocal, loving relationships, since I had nothing to emulate, no way to build myself in the image of someone happy.

Several years ago, I was involved with a co-worker of mine: a quiet, nerdy man with a sharp tongue and a quick intellect. We worked in a bookstore together, and shared recommendations with one another throughout the workday - for me, he chose Jorge Luis Borges and Helene Cixous, for him - I chose Simone de Beauvoir and James Baldwin. We played music together, and in my living room, he often picked up my guitar and serenaded me with the pained, country-twinged love songs of Bonnie Prince Billy. I adored him. He regularly stayed over at my house: we drank wine until the sun came up, cramming as much conversation into the night as we could; our minds were quick and young and eager for debate, thriving on these rapid exchanges. We were more than platonic, but undefined. I was deeply infatuated with his mind, and began to fantasize about the two of us reading, writing, and collaborating into old age. I figured he just needed some time to commit. I could wait.

Then, I started to notice things: how much he made fun of fat people. The stories about his youth: how he had been very fat as a young person, and his dad regularly barged into the bathroom while he was in the shower, took pictures of him, and taunted him later by shoving the pictures into his face and saying, “Look at yourself! You’re too fat and disgusting for anyone to ever love you. If you don’t lose weight, you’re going to be alone forever.” The time he wrote “No Fat Chicks” in Russian (confusingly) and hung it on our workstation, while laughing hysterically. And then there was the relentless

derision he directed at our boss - a fat black woman - and his constant mockery of her behind her back.

On weekday mornings, he would leave my house to catch the early train while I was still in the shower or getting dressed. At first, I thought he was just more punctual than I am; I was always late for work. Then, one day, I asked him to wait for me. He mumbled something, and refused to look me in the eye. My stomach sank. This wasn't about being on time at all. Now I know he did not want to be seen walking into work with me in the morning. My eyes would have given it all away. When I finally met his girlfriend, a tiny, quiet girl he'd hidden on the other side of the city - I took in her small, lithe frame and delicate, slender body. None of this was incidental. Her existence was a shock to me; I wondered, how did he even have time to have a secret girlfriend, considering all the time we spent together? We were never exclusive, but I thought our time together meant something. Did our conversations, our music, our nights together mean anything to him? *If I was thin, would he have wanted me the way I wanted him?* Or, would he have been so embarrassed to be seen with me in public, arm in arm, hand in hand, obviously *together* in some way, if I was thin? These are the questions which plague us fat girls. Now I was the "other woman", unwittingly. I was forced into a role I never signed up for.

When we fat girls are in a sexual relationship, our size can be an embarrassment to our sexual partners. It is also important to understand and think critically about the ways people are "allowed" to express sexual attraction for fat women. If fat women, as a class of people, are generally considered disgusting, unattractive, and undeserving of love and affection, it stands to reason that those who are attracted to us might want to hide or

repress their feelings, depending on how invested they are in upholding the status quo. In "She'll Do Anything," Mona Awad hones in on the "slutty", sexually adventurous fat girl trope, hidden from view by an embarrassed man who wants to have her but not be in public with her. She says,

> They're finishing off their second round of drinks when Dickie starts wanting to tell them about this fat chick he's been banging lately. Being Dickie, he doesn't mind going into detail. How her tits clap when he's taking her from behind. How you'd assume - he'd assumed, anyway - that she would be, you know, loose down there, but actually, surprise, surprise. "Gastro sex," Dickie says, draining his Fireball. "Best sex I've ever had, hands down." (Awad 2016, 124)

For Dickie, and maybe for his friends, "gastro sex," as he so eloquently calls his sexual soirees with this nameless fat woman, is in a different sexual category altogether from thin, "normal" sex. Assumedly, fucking a fat woman is so deviant that the act requires this unique descriptor unto itself. Dickie tells his buddies, "Anyway, the best thing about fucking her?...*She'll do anything*." (emphasis mine, Awad 2016, 125) In this exchange, this glimpse into ritualized masculinity, performed over drinks, we can see the appeal of this fat girl who will "do anything." She's not the girl you bring home to your parents, no; she's not the girl you take out to meet your friends, never; she's the girl behind the scenes, under the covers. She's the girl you go to for one thing. She's the girl with very little self-respect, the girl who will debase herself just for you. She's the girl who will do anything. If we have no way to appeal to men in the "normal" ways of courting and attracting, maybe this is one way we can.

With this cultural training in mind, it’s not surprising that I could never understand, when my husband and I started dating, why he was so kind and good to me, why he proudly introduced me to his parents, why he held my hand firmly and put his arm around me with confidence as we walked downtown to the movie theater, in full

view of everyone. None of this made sense to me. I'd wholesale bought into the narrative that as a fat girl, I was doomed to live without long-term love and affection. I still lay awake at night, worrying - will he find someone else? Die in tragic car crash? Have a fluke stroke in his thirties? What will I do then? Since I already cheated the system, found someone, fell deeply in love and am happily married, I cannot possibly scam the system twice. And so it goes. The power of these destructive, dominant narratives can only begin to be dismantled if we are aware of them. Even as I am writing this, I still bend to these deeply-embedded, toxic stories other people tell about me. Maybe discourse analysis *and* a really excellent therapist are needed.

When I was a child, I remember, every chance I got, gathering my penny to wish on shopping mall wishing wells, closing my eyes tight, squeezing the penny in my stubby little fingers, thinking fiercely, "I wish to fall in love. I just want someone who will love me no matter what." Certainly plenty of people wish for love - crave it, even - and put a high priority on finding it. For me, though, as a young chubby girl-child, it was the utterance of "no matter what" which held the most importance. See, I could not fathom someone loving me "just the way I was", as Billy Joel and other pop stars sang in sentimental tones on my mom's soft-rock radio stations. And no matter how hard I tried to lose weight - I played (and trained) for sports teams all year round, limited my food intake, ran around the neighborhood on foot and on bike with my friends, drank Slim-fast, furiously crunched my abdomen in my bedroom as my family slept, prayed to God to make me smaller - nothing really worked.

So I knew, at a certain point, that someone would have to love me *despite* my appearance, not because of it. I knew this as deeply as a person can know anything. It was

written on my skin, in my bones. The very things I wanted most - love, affection, kindness, attraction - I knew these things would not come easily. When it comes to fat women and girls, contemporary culture is cruel and unforgiving. Popular wisdom tells us that with enough willpower, we can be thin; so what's the problem? Why won't these women just get off their asses and work out a little bit? The disgust we have for the fat woman's body is relentless. She breaks our social and cultural rules and we don't like it one bit.

As feminist discourse has evolved, and more women's voices enter into conversations about body image and fatness, it's become clear that women experience the public sphere differently due to their race, class, and other identity markers. There are, thus, important distinctions to be made as far as the ways fatness intersects with race, class, and gender in specific ways. Margaret K. Bass, in her essay, "On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture" tells us how her blackness and fatness intersect and interact. She tells the story of a young black girl living in the South during Jim Crow laws and segregation; she speaks first about the ways in which she was taught to resist the anti-black messages to which she was relentlessly subjected. She says,

> I survived that confusing and painful period in my life never understanding racism or Jim Crow but rebelling against it in my own childlike way whenever opportunity arose. When scolded by a department store clerk for drinking water out of the "white" fountain, my brother and I would feign ignorance and declare: "We thought the 'c' word stood for cola and the 'w' word stood for water. We don't want to drink cola. It's not good for us. Worked every time! (Bass 2001, 219-220)

She recounts the ways in which her mother and father took her aside and talked to her about anti-black racism. Never, she explains, was she made to feel that this racism was her fault, or something that should reflect on her personally. She continues, "[b]ecause of my caring and conscientious parents, I have never felt one moment's shame about my

Africanness. I glory in my kinky hair, wide nose, full lips, and creamy brown skin. I can even appreciate my big butt, but that ends the appreciation for my body. I am repulsed by the rest of me." (Bass 2001, 220) Compared to the conversations she had with her parents about being unapologetic about her blackness, being fat is likely considered differently - something that is her fault - and something she can change. Thus, if she (or anyone) continues to be fat, it is a personal failing and deserving of punishment. (Wann 2009, introduction) Unlike skin color, it is assumed that fat can be reduced or eliminated. This understanding changes the ways in which fat bias and anti-blackness merge and manifest.

Bass continues by discussing all the ways she was prepared to face a life filled with racism. She also discusses how inadequately she was prepared to face a life filled with fat hatred. She explains,

> It did not occur to my mother to talk to her chubby daughter about her anguish or struggle to make her body thin. It did not occur to my mother to ask her chubby daughter, who hated gym class, to join her in her daily exercise regimen. These omissions had nothing to do with neglect. My mother's mind was on other things – her efforts and energies focused on shielding me from the physical and psychic dangers all around me in the Jim Crow South." (Bass 2001, 221)

Here we see the ways in which fatness and blackness in combination can be complicated for young women growing up. As her parents' priority was keeping their child safe in an angry, racist world, the focus was primarily on her skin color and thus, her parents overlooked the dangers she might face as a young, fat, black girl. Her parents may have even seen her fatness as a kind of protection from the sexualized gaze of white men around her, thus making them less likely to address the issue head-on.

Bass then explains that in some contexts, her body was appreciated (specifically in Mississippi, when she was around her family and was more insulated in and by black communities), but rarely admired. And becoming middle-class opened up the old wounds

experienced in childhood - and exacerbated them. She says, “I am defeated. I am humiliated and put in my place, and as I write I marvel at how closely related this language is to the language of racism. My racial self would never allow this, but my fat self concedes, gives up. I don’t think any middle class person, woman, in this country can be fat and happy.” (Bass 2001, 229). And as well, she notes, racial body norms had changed by then, too. She remembers a time that the stigma was not so great, a time when she could

> …crawl into my racial cocoon when the subjects of weight, fat, health, and diet came up in conversations. Back then, African American adults seemed much more accepting of fat people than either my childhood classmates or my present colleagues. Aside from some “good-hearted” teasing, I did not feel the discrimination or exclusion that I now feel as a fat person. I guess my generation lived with fat parents, grandparents, siblings, and relatives of every sort. Obesity was prevalent among African Americans, so fat stood out less than it does now. Fat was common, natural, and often admired. (226-227)

The last few decades have certainly ushered in an era in which fatness symbolizes laziness and ill health, and the "obesity crisis" is regularly addressed in serious tones on new outlets. Whether you stand on the left or the right of the political spectrum, fat is seen as unequivocally bad. On the left, we have the Whole Foods shopping, environmentally conscious, hike taking, North Face wearing hippie/yuppie who is consumed with ideas about health. On the right, we have the old standards of white femininity and white masculinity, in which the women are slender and the men are strong and muscular. For a fat black woman, stigmatized by both her weight and her skin color, there is little room to maneuver without being pushed into the margins of society.

Despite their specific experiences of what we might call hyper-marginalization, black women are taking the reins and addressing fatness in new and innovative ways. For example, Roxane Gay recently published her memoir *Hunger* to rave reviews and wide

readership[3]. I've seen Gay speak on a couple of different occasions, and her events are always filled to the brim with excited readers. She also has a large Twitter following[4] and engages a wide range of topics via social media. In *Hunger* (and on the press circuit she did to publicize the book), Gay speaks frankly about fat discrimination and about her experience of living in a fat woman's body, and confronts some of the nuances that are rarely discussed. For example, she also addresses the differences between what she calls "Lane Bryant fat" (153) and being "very fat," like she is: "Oftentimes, the people who I make uncomfortable by admitting that I don't love being fat are what I like to call Lane Bryant fat. They can still buy clothes at stores like Lane Bryant, which offers sizes up to 26/28. They weigh 150 or 200 pounds less than I do. They know some of the challenges of being fat, but they don't know the challenges of being *very* fat." (Gay 2017, 153) And she counters the accusation that she is fat-phobic because she writes and speaks about self-hatred in regards to her fatness.

> I hesitate to write about fat bodies and my fat body especially. I know that to be frank about my body makes some people uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable too. I have been accused of being full of self-loathing and of being fat-phobic. There is truth to the former accusation and I reject the latter. I do, however, live in world where the open hatred of fat people is vigorously tolerated and encouraged. I am a product of my environment. (Gay 2017, 153)

Gay makes an important distinction here between widely-condoned disgust for fat bodies and individualized self-loathing. It is difficult to love oneself when nearly every part of society is telling you to do otherwise. Sometimes the message conveyed by fat positive activists - love yourself! - is not enough to drown out the noise from everywhere else. To

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3 http://www.roxanegay.com/hunger/

4 https://twitter.com/rgay?ref_src=twsrc%5Eappleosx%7Ctwcamp%5Esafari%7Ctwgr%5Eprofile

make a comparison, just as Black Lives Matter activism would not be needed in a world in which black lives were not snuffed out with regularity by state actors, the impetus for fat-positivity or a fat-acceptance movement would not be necessary in a world in which fat people were not treated with such disgust.

"To be clear," she writes, "the fat acceptance movement is important, affirming, and profoundly necessary, but I also believe that part of fat acceptance is accepting that some of us struggle with body image and haven't reached a place of peace and unconditional self-acceptance." (Gay 2017, 153) Gay's sentiment here is under-explored in fat-positive movements and activist circles, in my experience. Because fat people experience such degradation on such a frequent basis, there is an understandable reaction which compels fat activists to affirm and celebrate fat bodies unconditionally. This makes sense, as many of us face widespread disdain in mainstream culture and crave uplift once in awhile. However, as Gay reminds us, celebratory fat activism should not obscure the pain that continues to be involved in living in a fat female body. And she addresses the reluctance of mainstream feminists to discuss issues of fatness and the tendency to collapse "women's experiences" under one umbrella, erasing the experience of fat women and women with other, marginalized identities.

Adding to the conversation and specificity of black women writing about the realities of their bodies, Samantha Irby speaks disarmingly frankly about her fatness in her book of essays *We Are Never Meeting In Real Life*. In the essay, "Fuck it, bitch, stay fat," she writes,

> Do you think fat people don't know? Because we definitely do! We're repulsive to look at, and undeserving of both love and easily-accessible relatively inexpensive yet well-made clothing. We get it! We have seen the messages in movies and magazines, on the Internet and TV, and we understand. If we wear something

> form-fitting we're delusional pigs who have the audacity to think we look attractive, but if we wear shapeless sacks all our offensive, stretched-out flesh, we're sloppy dirtbags who need to get our shit together. It's a lose-lose, unless you lose weight, but good luck keeping it off without reconstructing your entire brain and DNA. (Irby 2017, 169)

Thus, fat women often find themselves facing a double-bind when deciding how to present themselves to the world: if you display your body with confidence, you are delusional about your appeal; if you cover your body up, you are a lazy slob who doesn't care about her appearance.

Irby brings up the ways we ignore the traumas and issues that may lead someone to become fat (as does Gay), and instead choose to admonish them to lose weight without consideration for their particular circumstances:

> I wish that I was an emotionally healthy human without years of accumulated trauma, one who just *decided* to be a fat caricature of a person perched gleefully atop a mountain of doughnuts, shoving candy bar after candy bar between my teeth while cackling demonically over how much money my eventual care will cost taxpayers or whatever it is comments-section trolls always accuse fat people of doing. (Irby 2017, 168)

Through humor and self-abasement, and by poking at stereotypes and caricature of fat people and thin people's clueless responses, Irby makes her point that maybe all of this cultural fat-hatred is a bit extreme. She promotes self-acceptance and a more empathetic approach to physical difference, and says, "I guess what I'm saying is that maybe we could all just mind our own fucking business for once, and that when you can actually see a person's scars, maybe be a pal and don't pick at them." (Irby 2017, 168-9) She encourages this empathic approach, even when she is unable to have a lot of empathy for herself, and speaks honestly about her feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt with skill and humor. Both she and Roxane Gay are much-needed voices in a sea of "obesity-epidemic" rhetoric which does not account for the complicated realities many fat people face. As fat black women, they also experience the world in ways that fat white women

do not, which adds another layer of nuance to their writing. Fat activism is often accused of being a very white endeavor (see the organization *NoLose* statement here for an example of this critique - http://nolose.org/about/policy/fat-white-activism-poc)[5], so writing by women like Gay and Irby can broaden the perspectives on fatness and women's lives.

1.1 Growing Up Fat: Fat Girlhood

It's hard being a fat girl. Growing up, you face a special kind of scrutiny that other girls do not. Don't get me wrong: all girls who grow up in our society experience moments when they are sexualized before they are ready, get unwanted comments about their bodies, are catcalled, and are on the receiving end of all kinds of other traumas - rape and molestation included - at the hands of men who think our bodies belong to them. But fat girl children are subjected to a different kind of treatment than girls who are thin and considered beautiful. We are put in a separate category; our parents put us on diets when we are too young to understand why, we are often ignored as other girls start to get asked out on dates, and we get chastised for things we very often cannot control.

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[5] In this statement, the co-presidents and members of NoLose say, "We are not having the hard conversation needed to build the truly solid foundation of inclusivity and diversity that we rest much of our argument of anti-oppression upon. This is particularly important since both government programs and the diet industry have been specifically singling out and targeting people of color in recent campaigns. From Michelle Obama's selection of Beyonce Knowles as the face of her national campaign against obese children to the disproportionate number of children of color represented in the state of Georgia's "Strong4Life" campaign, the face of the "obesity epidemic" in public policy has largely become people of color. Similarly, the diet industry has focused several of its most recent national advertising campaigns around African American celebrity icons, including the selection of Janet Jackson as a representative of Nutria System, and Charles Barkley and Jennifer Hudson as spokespeople for Weight Watchers."

Every woman learns, in some revelatory moment, that she is a girl, a creature unlike her male peers. Whether it comes when you are shut out of playing a sport with the boys, accused of having girl-cooties, or taunted about having tampons in your bag, we all have some moment when we realized we were different from the boys. Maybe it came when your bra strap was snapped by a boy classmate, or when someone told you shop class or computer science was only for boys. In any case, we are not born with the knowledge that we are different from boys, but instead, it is a gradual process of discovering our difference. We can always go back to the words of Simone de Beauvoir: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." The same can be said about learning that you are fat, and thus belong to a different category altogether.

Judith Moore, in her memoir *Fat Girl*, recounts the ugly treatment fat girls sometimes receive from their parents. Her mother made it abundantly clear, from the outset, that Judith ruined her life. She says of her mother, "I wrecked her life. My mother told me many times that once she gave birth to me, she was trapped. She also said that I tore her up down there, that after my enormous butt pushing its way out of her, she was never the same." (Moore 2005, 66) Moore's relationship with her mother is obviously fraught, and the resentment her mother harbors is exacerbated and magnified by Moore's chubby little body. A mother who sees her daughter's inability or unwillingness to conform to feminine expectations can make an already stressed situation even worse, as we can see in Moore's memoir.

The double whammy Moore faces as a fat girl, who her mother considers a burden, creates tension and trauma throughout her young life. She is constantly at war with her mother, or rather, her mother is at war with her. She explains, "I was fat. Not

quite six and so fat you could hardly find my blue eyes, squished as they were between my fat cheeks and my fat forehead. Yes, even my forehead was fat. So were my feet." (Moore 2005, 80) Moore addresses the difficult reality of being a fat girl, a girl who is not living up to expectations, a girl who is not girl-like, a girl who constantly sees the expression of disappointment on her mother's face when her little body is on display.

Not every fat girl has traumatic experiences like Moore details in her memoir. Sometimes, fatness in the family is normal, and young girls begin to notice their difference as a result of interactions with their peers. Brittany Gibbons, in her memoir *Fat Girl Walking*, explains how her fatness was typical inside the confines of her immediate family, and linked to her socioeconomic class. She says, "[I]t's just that when you are a kid who is…inactive and living close to the poverty line…fresh veggies are expensive and chicken nuggets take a toll." (Gibbons 2015, 10) She explains that her family's financial situation changed for the worse when she was a kid, and as they became more strapped for cash, "our lives…changed completely…[and]…between full-time jobs the business [they owned], my parents no longer had time to take us to soccer practice; and dinner became my brother and I schlepping half a mile down a busy highway to McDonald's…" (Gibbons 2015, 9)

The shift from lower-middle class to near-poverty makes an important difference in the ways Gibbons and her brother interact with exercise, leisure activity, and food. Many young kids get exercise via after-school sports, but these activities are not available for everyone. She explains further,

> You would think my parents would have been concerned with my growing waistline, but they said nothing. Although I come from a household that struggled with weight, I didn't grow up on diets. My mom was never overly feminine,

> opting instead for short hair and sensible jeans and sweatshirts, so vanity and diets were never really her thing. (Gibbons 2015, 10)

Once again, we see the links made between femininity, diets, and thinness. Gibbons explains that because her mother is unconcerned with being feminine, her higher weight is less of an issue. Dieting and the quest for a thin body becomes the domain of the intentionally feminine woman; we can look to what feminist theorists say about how power is enacted on the feminine body to see how this plays out (which I will detail in my next chapter). Because Gibbons' mother opts out of this particular type of womanhood, Brittany does not realize her fat body is unacceptable. She says, "The point is, if my parents didn't recognize I was overweight, how was I supposed to?" (Gibbons 2015, 10) It's an important question, and different families have different relationships to fatness.

For another example, my family has a lot of fat people in it, especially on my mother's side. However, both of my parents are relatively thin, even though my mother has battled with her body for as long as I can remember. She's gone from a curvy-looking teenager to skin-and-bones thin when she married my dad, to heavy-set after having three children and not much time to exercise, to somewhere in-between now that she's in her 60s. My dad was always pretty thin, save for a beer gut he developed in his 40s. He battled cancer for five years or so, which shrunk him down again; there were a few years when he was sickly and frail, unable to eat, his clothes falling off his body as the chemotherapy and radiation decimated his immune system. My extended family includes lots of big women on my mom's side, but likely as a result of an uncle outside of my bloodline. One of my dad's sisters, my aunt, is very fat, and it prevents her from getting around; she needs a wheelchair and a walker and a lot of assistance in order to be mobile.

During my girlhood and adolescence, I was around chubby and fat women. They were not foreign to me, like they are in some families. But they were not quite close enough to be in my intimate, inner circle. My mother was always battling with her body, gaining and losing, but she was never consistently fat. Instead of offering the fat women in my family as a source of comfort, they became a way for my family to warn me, an ever-present danger about what I might become if I did not watch myself. They were a cautionary tale; they were the family members who took the wrong path. They were what I would become if I did not take care of myself.

My paternal grandmother, Wanda, was a hearty, stocky woman as she aged, and her house always smelled of pierogi and borscht when we visited her little farm in Northern Michigan during the summer. She looked like she would be right at home peeling potatoes in Eastern Europe; her body was built from meat and potatoes and hard work. She was thick, sturdy, a woman who worked hard and mothered sternly. She would say to me, as I made her dinner in her aging, declining years: “When did you get so big? You have a huge stomach.” Even though she was no Kate Moss, I had crossed the line in my mid-twenties, becoming too big for her taste.

My mother’s side is, formerly and currently, very transparent about their opinions on the fat body; they despise it. Both my grandfather and grandmother, now dead, were thin for most of their lives and saw fatness as a moral failure.. I was constantly told to lose weight by my grandfather, until I stopped talking to him entirely during my early 20s because of this. I am not sure if he even noticed, but I did not interact with him or say a word to him for the last six or seven years of his life. He despised fat people, especially fat women. So did his wife, my grandmother and namesake, but I think she took her cues

from him. They both hated women, but for a woman misogyny is often wrapped up in a mess of self-hatred instead of hatred of the “other.” My Granny, the original MaryAnn, was tiny. She was a formidable woman, standing about four feet eleven (and progressively shrinking throughout her life, she insisted), and could scare the biggest, burliest biker with an icy glare. She was not a warm woman, or even a kind one. But she survived in a time and space which was nasty and inhospitable for women; she also shaped me - her dear namesake - in ways too numerous and complicated to quantify.

My mom and Granny had a ritual. Granny would lose some weight - my guess is that she was 120 pounds at her heaviest, maybe 130 - and then fuss and fret about her clothes not fitting anymore. She would then run to my mother and bestow all of her ill-fitting clothes upon my mother in the loaded, passive-aggressive fashion that only Southern mothers can execute with such grace. "These clothes are just too big for me," she would say, "I think you will fit them, though."

My mom battles with her weight to this day - aged 65 and still going strong. I am convinced she will not quit smoking because she’s worried about gaining weight. I guess lung cancer and emphysema are preferable to ten or twenty pounds. She smokes a pack a day, Marlboro Red 100’s. I smoked for years, and Granny smoked for about 50. The men in our family are not much help. One year - I think I was around 25 - I called my dad for Father’s Day. We started chatting, and our conversation strayed to my mother. She regularly struggles with colds, bronchitis, and a smoker's cough so deep it sounds like death. This addiction is going to kill her, it’s just a matter of when.

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Dad: “Your mom isn’t feeling so good. You should give her a call.”

Me: “Sure, I will. I wish she would quit smoking.”

Dad: “Me, too.”

Me: “Well, maybe you could encourage her. I think she’s really worried about gaining weight if she quits. If you told her you think she’s beautiful no matter what…”

Dad: “I’m not going to do that.”

Me: “...”

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This is the same man who harassed me for years about my weight, told me I would never be successful if I was overweight, that I would die, and that my entire world would fall apart should I not shed these excess pounds I carry around with me. I’m still here, though. But I worry that he’s right, that everyone is right - that I am going to die early, leaving my beloved partner alone to fend for himself. I am not the first to ask this question, and hopefully not the last: what happens to someone who is told, from the time they are a small child or adolescent, that they are going to die? Not because of a rare cancer, or a surprise tumor, or because I didn’t wear my seatbelt, but because of my own negligence, my own laziness, my own sloth and disregard for my well-being.

What toll does this take on someone, especially, in my case, a young girl? “I’m just worried that you’re going to die.” These are strange and powerful words for a eleven-year-old to take in, words that are a threat veiled in what looks like compassion. We are meant to believe that these threats are *for our own good*, a phrase any fat person has heard ad nauseum. I am always afraid I am going to die.

I look at how small my mom was, in pictures, before she had me. She looks like a skeleton. She looks so happy. It seems like a very reasonable progression for my mother

to jump from the care and support of one domineering, magnanimous man to the next; my father and grandfather are remarkably similar at a glance. But my father has no tact, no finesse, no ease - he is like a blunt object that smacks you in the face when he walks in the room. My grandfather, a man who nicknamed himself Prince Charming[6], was brilliant, intellectual, and gracefully manipulative. He also, like my Granny, was an expert in the art of never saying what he actually meant or thought, unless it was in a fervent letter to the editor espousing the great worth that Wal-Mart has to the US economy or the lambasting the evils of Mexican immigration. He was a wonderful grandfather. He did all of the things Grandfathers are supposed to do: he played with us endlessly when we were children, took us to McDonald's for Happy Meals when my mom was tired of us, and brought us endless toys and trinkets from the grocery store - the kind of cheap, made-in-China garbage that inexplicably thrills seven year olds. He was a wonderful grandfather. Until he wasn't.

I was recently joking with my husband that between the ages of 15 and 25, I was completely absorbed by the task of proving my humanity. I think many girls go through this, especially if they come from traditional or conservative families. In my family, my body was on display constantly - it was fodder for critique, ogling, commentary - you name it. I knew fat was bad and I knew I needed to contain myself. Not only in respect to fat, but in all the ways girls need to be contained. Within my flesh, there seemed to be something that got everyone around me very riled up. I didn't know the words, I couldn't

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[6] This is not a joke. My grandfather thought he was too young and, you guessed it - charming - to be a grandfather at 40 (or so) when his oldest daughter started having kids. So, then and there, he determined that he would not be Grandad or Pappy or Gramps. He would be Prince Charming. I never questioned any of this until I was about 17. The Freudian implications are endless. It also warrants a feminist analysis that I will do, another time though.

have expressed it at the time but I knew, deep down in my soul - *I was an object*. I had to prove that I was something more than a body, unlike my brother, or my father, or Prince Charming. Before I ever knew the name Simone de Beauvoir, I knew that my body defined me, fat or not. The fat just made it more complicated.

As a response to much of this, I started making myself vomit in order to lose weight around the age of sixteen. I was an athlete, as active as I could be, working out through several sports seasons and during the summer. But I was still "overweight," according to my father, who coached me during the softball season sometimes. An aggressive perfectionist, he was hard on all of the players, but especially on me, his oldest daughter. I was the child most like him, complete with dramatic mood swings and an often obsessive drive to succeed. (In fact, none of this was really on my terms. I was actually just afraid to fail, probably because of all the pressure that was put on me.) At the end of every season, he would give every player on his team a progress report, an idea probably borne from the corporate culture in which he existed and thrived.

Mine was always the same. *You're never going to succeed if you don't lose some weight. You can't run fast enough with all of those extra pounds. If you could just lose the weight, you would be a star player.* It certainly was not the most cruel thing he ever said to me, to be sure, but it was crushing nonetheless. I wanted desperately to please him, as his career demanded he travel most days out of the week, most weeks out of the month. The little time he spent with us children was usually during these sports seasons, and then he would board a plane and be gone again.

So when the constant dieting and obsessive exercising did not do the trick, I began to make myself throw up. I'd read about bulimia in health class, seen the PSAs and

the after-school specials. Eating disorders were all the rage in the 1990s when I was coming of age, and I got all the information I needed from those who were trying to dissuade me from detouring down the very path I ended up choosing.

Between my father and the comments from my grandfather, I knew, by the time I reached my teenage years, some drastic measures were needed. I was only getting bigger, boys paid no attention to me, and I wanted to please the men in my life. I knew I did not have the discipline for anorexia, but binging and purging seemed right up my alley. I never thought about the damage I was doing to my young body. Born three months premature, I was used to my body not quite working the way I should. I had severe allergies and occasional asthma, as well as gastrointestinal issues that remain mostly undiagnosed to this day. My body always seemed like a stranger to me, doing things it was not supposed to, always without my consent. The battle with my body began when I was too young to even remember, on that day in June of 1982 when my mother went to the hospital, unwilling and unready for her first child's arrival.

So when my doctor asked me, when I was about 18, if I made myself throw up (he actually just mimed the action of sticking his fingers down his throat, which was a strange way to connect with me, I thought), I was stunned that there was any evidence of the practice I'd been engaged in for several years. I came to learn that I was already damaging my teeth and my esophagus. This is part of what happens, or at least what happened to me, as a result of the years of familial and social chastisement about my weight. I had developed a disconnection from my body, due to illness and emotional trauma, that made it incredibly difficult to do anything good for myself. I wonder, again,

what my life would look like had I been focused on other things, besides this self-hatred. I cannot imagine a life in which my body is not the enemy.

1.2 Should I Just Take What I Can Get?

Sometimes, it seems, our fat-girl bodies can open us up to predatory behavior from others (often, but not always, men) in unique ways. Samantha Irby, in her essay, "You Don't Have to Be Grateful for Sex," discusses the ways her chubby body defined her existence as an adolescent and shaped the ways men interacted with her. She explains, "I saw my first adult human penis when I was thirteen years old. My mom had been gone for approximately thirty-seven seconds, and I heard a lilting patois call from the bathroom, 'Sweetheart, come in here and give me a hand. I want to show you something.'" (Irby 2017, 53) Turns out it was the maintenance guy, who had been "working in our apartment all morning; his work boots thundering down our hallway, his aggressive stench filling my nostrils every time he swaggered past the bedroom where I sat, blissfully ignorant, in a backward Kansas City Chiefs cap with a library book held an inch from my face." (Irby 2017, 53) Irby describes her relatively sheltered girlhood, how she was not allowed much freedom to move outside her home because of her mom's disability (53).

She describes being somewhat baffled when she goes to see what the maintenance man wants, and says, "But when I rounded the corner to see what he needed, dude was just standing there with the damp slug of his penis stretched across his palm, a smug, satisfied smile plastered on his face." (Irby 2017, 54) Being young and inexperienced,

and having already attained the self appointed title of "champion masturbator" (54), Irby is unsure how to proceed in the situation. She explains that she knows nothing "about sex or men or where a penis goes in your actual acne-studded, oily T-zoned body," (55) but recognizes her own sexual feelings in the moment, which she calls "'the sparkle feeling', stirring to life in my flooded basement as I studied [his penis] from root to tip: tufts of dark curly hair nestling a ridged, veiny shaft that curved to a pale, smooth tip, still glistening with drops of urine." (Irby 2017, 54-5)

Unsure of how to interact with the man and his exposed penis, Irby describes a mixture of conflicting impulses, one being "a desire to stroke it with my fingers before gently taking it into my mouth" (55) but also recognizing the dangers of sex and insecurity about her inexperience. She says, "Also heterosexual intercourse definitely leads to fertilized eggs, and my mom and I were still sharing a bed, so where the fuck would we even put a baby?" (55) She continues, "I had gotten a B minus in science at the end of the school year. I was a thirteen-year-old who still sucked her thumb and definitely was not ready to be anyone's mother." (55)

The feelings and impulses articulated by Irby encapsulate what many young girls go through when they find themselves sexualized at a young age, usually by older men. I would be shocked if most women in America do not have some kind of similar story. We want to be real women, and if we are old enough, have probably felt some sexual feelings and even responded to them by masturbating. But when we are suddenly thrust into a situation like the one Irby describes when we are still girls, we are not sure what to do with this kind of male attention. For fat girls, situations like these can become even more complicated because of our bodies. Irby recounts her encounter with the maintenance

man, as he looks at her and says, with his penis in hand, "'You want to touch it?' he offered hopefully. 'Oh, no, thank you!' I replied with forced cheerfulness, like I was at a friend's house turning down his mom's offer of a second helping of peas." (Irby 2017, 55) And here is where we diverge from this unfortunately common, shared experience of girlhood in a patriarchal context.

This is where fatness makes a difference, and shapes fat girls in particular ways. After Irby politely declines the man's offer, he counters with, "'No? Really?!' he asked in disbelief. 'Not even a chubby girl like you?'" (Irby 2017, 55) Because of her chubby body, the man assumes that she will take anything she can get. Even at thirteen. With a much older man in an inappropriate and probably illegal situation. He assumes that she would be grateful for his offer, whereas with a thin girl, he might not assume the same. Irby responds to this with, "What does that even mean? It's not like he was standing there holding a warm loaf of banana bread - I might have taken him up on that. But it was just an old, semi-flaccid, pervert penis: What the fuck did my chubby have to do with his chubby?" (Irby 2017, 55) It's in this way that young, fat woman learn about what they deserve or do not deserve in terms of love and sex.

It is these kinds of clues from men and women alike (but especially men trying to "get some" from us), that we learn about what we should desire, accept, and expect because of our bodies. Irby tries to make sense of the interaction and says, "I stood on the threshold of the bathroom, trying to gauge how mad I should be at his insult. Why was he so shocked by my refusal - do fat girls like sex more than skinny ones?" (Irby 2017, 55) Because of this interaction, Irby is sent reeling, wondering what her fatness has to do with his solicitation.

She says, "As a fat, gawky adolescent who was surely destined to live the rest of her life as a fat, gawky adult, would this be my last chance at sex? SHOULD I JUST TAKE WHAT I CAN GET?" (Irby 2017, 55) Fat girls learn early that we are supposed to settle. We learn that because of our bodies, we will not be loved and admired in the same way thin girls are. Because of interactions like this, which I have had, and likely many other fat/chubby girls have had, we begin to internalize the message that we are not enough as we are. So when we are propositioned in the future, these damning internalized messages may prompt us to engage in sexual activity we aren't especially interested in, simply because we are told and thus may assume that we cannot do any better.

Irby goes on to describe the sexual interactions she has later, one in which a man declares to her "'You really don't know how lucky you are to be with me'" (57) before they have sex. But she counters, "I've had sex with a lot of hot dudes - *surprisingly hot dudes*. And I'm sure you're all, 'Yeah, but they were pity bangs," and maybe? I mean, probably?! But there have been so many! They all couldn't have been trying to star in the John Hughes of my life!" (Irby 2017, 57) We can witness Irby going through what many of us fat girls try to reckon with - the disconnect between our private, sexual lives, and the messages we receive about our bodies. If we are so gross, why are we getting so much action? If fat girls are universally unattractive, as we are meant to believe, why am I in a loving relationship in which my husband adores me and my body? These things just don't add up. The title of Irby's essay sums it up for us, with words we can all live by: "You Don't Have to Be Grateful for Sex." This is especially important for fat girls to hear.

1.3 Daddy's Pretty Princess

In her memoir *This is Just My Face*, actress Gabourey Sidibe describes her own girlhood and growing up as a fat girl. Sidibe's work can be seen in *Precious,* based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire, as well as in the primetime drama *Empire.* Because of her dark skin and fat body, Sidibe is regularly ridiculed and demeaned publicly, which she discusses in her book. She describes the process of learning about what others thought of her body and says,

> I guess I was around six years old when I realized I was a fat kid. Maybe *notice* is a strong word. I was in my body, so I didn't spend a lot of time looking at it yet. I just took in that people said things about me that they didn't say about other kids. I didn't really get why other kids called me fatso or elephant, or why they felt they could talk about my body at all. (Sidibe 2017, 118)

Sidibe describes the process of learning about one's otherness. To fat girls (and boys), like she explains, we just live in our bodies and probably do not think too critically about our corporeality until someone brings it up. And they always do. She continues, "Eventually, I noticed my own family starting to talk about my weight...my brother started calling me fatso, hippo, and the names of other large animals, like the kids at school did..." (Sidibe 2017, 119) For fat girls, the home and one's family is not always a refuge from the cruelty we experience in public, at school or elsewhere. Sidibe says, "I still didn't really notice there was a problem until my father started suggesting that I lose weight so so that he could show everyone what a pretty princess he had for a daughter." (Sidibe 2017, 119) Although my father and grandfather may have not used the words "pretty princess," Sidibe's experience echoes mine in some ways.

Fathers of fat girls sometimes express their disappointment in our bodies like this, in a way that indicates that we are not living up to our potential and roles prescribed to us

as women and girls. If little girls are supposed to be "pretty princesses" and fat girls are not pretty, we must then change in order to live up to these gendered expectations. Sidibe explains further, "That's when I realized that I was different from other kids, and that this affected the people around me." (Sidibe 2017, 119) The disappointment fat girls conjure from our parents is one way we learn about our difference. Sidibe, again, says "It had never occurred to me that I looked bad in a way that would make my father not want his friends to know he had a daughter. It took so long to realize that my body was different, but it took about two seconds to jump to that conclusion." (Sidibe 2017, 119) Certainly most of us, of any size, have experienced disappointing our parents. But there is something special and traumatizing about the disappointment that comes along with having or being a fat child. Like Judith Moore recounts, her mother did not want to be seen with her in public because of her body. This can be a crushing experience for a child, when you realize your parent does not want to be associated with you.

In her novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin,* Mary Gaitskill follows the lives of her two titular characters as they navigate the everyday traumas of girlhood. Gaitskill traces the lives of her two main characters, Dorothy and Justine, from childhood, and documents the abuses they experience and inflict on those around them. Dorothy, the fat girl, experiences particularly brutal treatment from her father. She describes one nightmarish dinner table ordeal,

> Slowly, starting first with veiled attacks on "selfish turds" and "fat slobs," he began to tell me how awful I was. Soon he would be leaning towards me on his elbows, his mouth forming his words so vehemently that he showed his teeth. "You sit there on your fat butt night after night wearing the clothes I bought you, stuffing yourself with my food, stupid and ugly, contributing nothing. (Gaitskill 1991, 120)

This scene painted in excruciating detail by Gaitskill leads us to ponder: is it because Dorothy is fat that her father resents her? Or is her fat just an excuse to tear her down? Whatever the case may be, Gaitskill shows that abusive behavior from parents looks unique when aimed at a fat child, and particularly, I would argue, a fat girl child. When we are despised by our parents for the ways we look, we becomes easy targets for abuse and mistreatment. Because it is assumed that fatness results from laziness and lack of work ethic, our bodies then signal that our parents have not raised us "right." Our fat bodies can thus reflect their failed parenting. Then we become objects of ire and contempt from the people who see themselves as failures, because of our fat bodies. Gaitskill continues,

> Those dinner tribunals occurred with such frequency that I developed the ability to divide myself while they occurred; the external person who sat and cried while her father reviled her and the internal person who helped herself to more salad as he ranted, and noticed that the scalloped potatoes were particularly succulent tonight. (Gaitskill 1991, 120)

Gaitskill describes a skill we learn if we are subjected to this kind of treatment as girl-children - the ability to separate our bodies from the abuse we experience. This disassociation can result in many problematic behaviors down the road - mainly further disassociating from one's own body during sex, other kinds of abuse, as well producing the kind disassociation needed in order to cultivate an eating disorder, all of which I experienced, along with many other fat girls who do not find comfort or solace in their family unit.

The chapters that follow do not pretend to be an exhaustive description or deconstruction of the problems of fat women in this culture. Rather, I focus primarily on the sexual disgust and titillation that seems to be common in popular representations of

fat women. My aim here is to center fat women's experiences - although they differ - in order to extend feminist theories of the body to help provide context for and understanding of our culture's treatment of fat women. I use memoir, discourse analysis, and visual analysis in order to understand the ways fat women's bodies are represented and "read" in film, television, advertisements, and literature. I show the unique ways in which fat women's bodies are objectified and marginalized in cultural images and discourse.

1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

In chapter 2, I discuss what it means to "center" fat women's experiences, and I survey the scholars that have influenced the way I approach representations of fatness (and discipline of the body), and the missing piece that remains, despite several decades of feminist scholarship on the body.

In chapter three, I delve into two archetypes that, as I see it, continue (although not without challenge) to dominate mainstream representations of fat women in US popular media: the hypersexual, aggressive, insatiable fat women who will “do anything,” and the unloved, sad, lonely fat girl who sits alone on Friday nights with no callers or friends. These two archetypes can be seen in all kinds of popular culture, as I will show using film, television, fiction, memoir, advertisements, and other cultural artifacts[7], seeking to expose them as the controlling images that they are[8]. While these archetypes may be controlling, their dominance is of course not total.

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7 In my examination of these cultural artifacts, I use a similar approach to Patricia Hill Collins in her work on black women and black feminism. In *Black Feminist Thought* and in *Black Sexual Politics,* Collins traces the origins and genealogies of "controlling images" - images of black women that are used in order to oppress and control them under white supremacist

In chapter four, I look for examples of fat beauty, past and present. I discuss actress Lillian Russell, famous for her beauty, her size, and her appetites. I look at the icon Venus of Willendorf, and consider what she may have meant in her age. I then explore the ways consumer culture and socioeconomic class play into the cultural creation of beauty ideals. I ask if the lesbian body has more cultural permission to be fat; I also interrogate how fat attraction and fat fetishization differ, or are the same.

In chapter five, I examine fat women's representations that are outside the deviant/loveless dichotomy. I look for examples of fat women in media that do not bend to the will of the controlling archetypes that dominate popular imagery. I examine media such as *Roseanne, Mike and Molly, Parks and Recreation, Hairspray,* and others as I look for more positive or value-neutral representations of fat women in popular culture. I examine the role black women have played in de-stigmatizing the fat woman's body. I also take a look at the role of shows like *Project Runway* in making space for fat women in popular culture representations as well as on the high fashion runway. I try to look forward to see what more fat-accepting media might contain.

I have also included an appendix which highlights the important work done by fat studies scholars, and their influence on my work. I also discuss the ideas in my project that advance fat scholarship and add to these important contributions.

CHAPTER 2. FATNESS, THE MISSING PIECE IN FEMINIST BODY STUDIES

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patriarchy. The archetypes I develop in this project are similar to her articulation of "controlling images" - images that have a life outside of just their popular culture origins, and can play a role in how we come to understand ourselves.

[8] (See above reference.) I am using Patricia Hill Collins' phrase which refers to imagery of black women that is often used against them.

2.1 Centering Fat Women's Experience

When I reflect on my thirty-six years of living, I cannot think of one thing that defines me more, to the world around me, than my fatness. My body size influences everything I do - from job-seeking to sex and partnership, from encounters on the street to the ways I interact with my closest family members. Yet when I seek cultural and analytical perspective on this thing that has defined me since adolescence, I find little that directly addresses the specific situation of fat women, even within feminist studies. The feminist contribution to body studies—and particularly to issues of the normalization, harassment, and abuse of the female body--has been significant, and tremendously influential to my understanding. But fat women are objectified, harassed, and abused in different ways than thinner women, and the feminist canon does not do an especially good job of exploring these differences. Nor, despite the undeniable awareness of what Kim Chernin called "the tyranny of slenderness," is there adequate attention to the culture of ideas and images of fatness that we consume every day, which we also have a hand in creating and reproducing. And without a basic primer on the ways in which fat women are represented, the problem is difficult to address. This project, drawing on feminist memoir and feminist cultural studies, seeks to address these missing pieces.

When I was in my early and mid- 20s, finding a feminist consciousness absolutely saved my life. It allowed me to pursue the things I loved. It helped me stop binge-drinking; it helped me find the love of my life. It helped me find a career that meant something to me.. For example, when I first began graduate school, during the first year of my Master's program, I proposed to a fellow student that for Women's History Month (which she was organizing), that I lead a workshop on fatness and feminism. She looked

at me and said, pointedly, that no one would ever come to a workshop with like that. The next year, with a new organizer, I did a workshop called "fat positivity" and had about 40 people in attendance. But I did not forget the sting of rejection from her comments the year before.

I thought, as I entered graduate school after working customer service jobs, playing music, and organizing in feminist activist circles, that in Women's and/or Gender Studies departments people would be on board to talk about fatness and feminism. I was wrong. They were not, and they are still not. Feminism has a fat girl problem. In conversations about objectification, harassment, and sexualization, and despite the frequent call to "intersectionalism," many feminists still tend to generalize about the ways women are treated when it comes to fat experience. It may all stem from the same place - the dehumanization of women and the degradation we experience in a sexist society - but it looks different for me than it does for my thin friends. My body is used as an example of failure, a "fear of fat" being pervasive in all segments of society. In the context of women's liberation, this is important to address directly. It makes me wonder: is feminism for fat women?

Taking a cue from Black feminist writing, I "center" the fat women's experience in this project. Brittney Cooper, in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* discusses how, for the radical black women she focuses on in her text, the racialized body was central to their intellectual work. I do something similar, but placing the fat body at the center of the conversation. Cooper explains, "*Embodied discourse* refers to a form of Black textual activism wherein race women assertively demanded the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies

by placing them in the texts they write and speak." (Cooper 2017, 3) I appreciate this notion and I use a similar approach when it comes to the fat, female body, frequently consulting memoir to illuminate the way representations actually impact the lives of fat women.

My perspective on representations is that of critical discourse analysis. Everyone is shaped by the culture around us; we cannot escape the cues we get from parents, teachers, pastors, television, movies, advertisements, social media, and other cultural elements. We see ourselves reflected in and from these bits of culture, and as much as we might try to be immune to these influences, they end up affecting us somehow. Critical discourse analysis is a methodology that addresses these influences, and (as described by Teun A. Van Dijk),

> studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (Dijk 2001, 352)

Critical discourse analysis is not “neutral” in its aims, but directed toward change. So, by examining texts, narratives, images, interviews, and representations of fat women, I hope to push back on the notion that fat women are undesirable and unworthy of respect and admiration. To use Dijk's language, I take this explicit position and will work with discourse regarding fat women's bodies in attempts to represent us as human, not just a stereotype or an archetype. In order to understand the impact of culture on fat women's bodies, I work with popular narratives and counter narratives to understand the cues fat women get from popular culture about what their bodies and sexualities are and can be.

My personal experience as a fat woman leads me to this research, and it is integral in my work. I perform this research in solidarity with women who have experienced similar problems and oppression as I. Dijk explains, "Crucial for critical discourse analysts is the explicit awareness of their role in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a 'value-free' science, they argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of, and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction." (Dijk 2001, 352) Dismantling "objective," assumed knowledge about fat women's bodies is an integral part of this project. Performing critical discourse analysis will help me uncover what is assumed to be" common sense" in our cultural view regarding fatness and femininity. Dijk continues,

> Instead of denying or ignoring that such a [power] relation between scholarship and society, they plead that such relations be studied and accounted for in their own right, and that scholarly practices be based on such insights. Theory formation, description, and explanation, also in discourse analysis are sociopolitically "situated", whether we like it or not. (Dijk 2001, 352-3)

My scholarship rests on the foundations described here by Dijk. Building on these methodological approaches, as well as other feminist scholarship regarding the body, I try to understand the ways in which representations of women's bodies convey meaning. Out of these meanings marginalized groups are created, as well as privileged groups, and shown our respective places in society. This project assumes that power relations are at work when it comes to the interpretation, representation, and subsequent treatment of fat women.

Examining memoir is one way to explore the ways power relations are sustained by representations. Some of the most interesting, textured work on fatness is in memoir. For example, Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, while not specifically a part of fat studies per se, speaks to fat oppression and lived reality as a fat woman. This type of writing about

fatness has emerged in recent years, and Gay writes exclusively from the position of a specific Other, rather than trying to make assertions about women in general. Gay does make some broad statements about the oppression fat women face, but she is careful to remind us that she is hesitant to speak too generally. She discusses how her fat body is a direct response to being raped as a girl, affirming the position Susie Orbach took in the late 1970s, when she conceived of fatness as protection. Gay says, "I knew I wouldn't be able to to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away. Even at that young age, I understood that to be fat was to be undesirable to men, to be beneath their contempt, and I already knew too much about their contempt." (Gay 2017, 13) Gay and writers like Samantha Irby and Lindy West (who I will also draw from in this project) offer new and nuanced perspectives on fatness via their respective memoirs, showing also that no one experience of fatness is exactly the same.

Memoir has contributed in exciting ways to the study of fatness, but individual narratives alone, I believe, cannot capture what it means to be a fat woman in this culture. Although individual experiences differ, we share a context of popular images and narratives that are remarkably consistent and enduring, in which fat people are representationally maligned. Thus, we need work that bridges individual, lived experience with cultural analysis.

Memoir and discourse analysis, I believe, can work hand-in-hand to paint a fuller picture of the ways dominant narratives influence individual women's lives. Thus, in this project, I work to (1) bridge theory and experience by examining memoir and essay work written by fat women, and by chronicling my own experience of fat womanhood and

girlhood via memoir, and (2) examining dominant cultural narratives evident in television, film, literature about fat women that can influence our cultural and personal experiences of our bodies. The goal: that theory, personal narrative, and cultural analysis can all work together to give a picture of what fat women deal that they will experience, perhaps not exactly as their own, but intimately recognizable. That is what I try to offer in this project.

2.2 Historical Context for Fatness

The ways we understand human bodies have changed over time. There is much research to be done on fatness in the ancient world, and fatness in different countries and cultures. However, the scope of my project will not include the entirety of human history. Part of the reason for this is, of course, time and resources. A project of that magnitude could take years and years, and would need many dollars with which to fund it. However, this is not my only reason for "beginning" history, at least for the purposes of this project, around the Victorian era. Something changed during the Victorian era, with ripple effects we still feel today. The Victorians set the tone for much of what was to come, in terms of how bodies (and what those bodies can do[9]) are understood in much of the Western world. The Victorian era brought us much of what we consider to be emblematic of modern Western norms.

For example, modern medicine and public health found their footing during this time (Gilbert 2004), and the physical body became a symbol in specific and different

[9] see Foucault's essay on We "Other Victorians"

ways than before. Scholar Pamela Gilbert says of this time, "The body becomes both the sign and the metaphor of the nation. Individual bodies and their ills, as representatives of classes and populations, become indices of the condition of that less tangible entity, the social body." (Gilbert 2004, 4) The body, with all of its ills and beauty, came to symbolize the state of the nation, not just the state of a person's flesh. Thus, the ideas I grapple with in this project, as outlined below, come out of this ideological shift in which the body comes to mean more than just flesh and bones.

During this time, certain bodies begin to be pathologized, which will lead us to today's cultural and medical views on the fat body. Gilbert continues, "Public health advocates saw their role not merely as improving the physical health of individuals, as forming the moral character - closely tied to physical health and cleanliness - which in turn would produce the ideal modern citizen." (Gilbert 2004, 4-5) These ideas about moral character being linked to the physical body are extraordinarily important to the ways we deal with health and wellness in our country, and in the Western world. This allows us, as a society, to conceive of some bodies as worthy and deserving, and others to be flawed and expendable.

This framework developed during the Victorian era, leads us to one of the most important theoretical underpinnings of this project, and of our cultural attitudes about fatness, as articulated by Susan Bordo when she says, in "Reading the Slender Body," "[T]he size and shape of the body have come to operate as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder) - as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual." (Bordo 1993, 193) If we understand the body in this way, and I argue that we do, the fat body becomes a symbol for much inner disorder and chaos, not just in respect

to the individual but in respect to the nation and society which created this fat body. This shift in perception is what leads us to consider the fat body not just in terms of itself, but in terms of "the obesity epidemic" and other broader significance.

There was also a shift, during the Victorian era, in the physical expectations and standards for women. Not only were they expected to corset in service of popular fashion, but they were expected to present in specific ways. Casey Finch, in her history of Victorian underwear and the female body, says, "Loosely speaking, we can say that the buxom, voluptuous, and indeed rotund Renaissance ideal of the female body, which by the eighteenth century had come to seem faintly dated, was finally and irrevocably overthrown during the Victorian period." (Finch 1991, 340) Finch traces the shifts and changes in which parts of the female body were considered beautiful; she says, "...for the last millennium...the history of the female body (or, rather, the history of its representations) has been characterized by an oscillation between, on the one hand, an emphasis on the breast, posterior, and limbs and, on the other, an emphasis on a sloping, curvaceous stomach." (Finch 1991, 341) Sadly, however, for those of us with more of a prominent sloping, curvaceous stomach than others, Finch says decidedly, "The late nineteenth century is best understood as the moment in Western culture when what has come to be called the anorectic body was placed more or less permanently at the very center of the sexual imagination." (Finch 1991, 341)

By the early 20th century, as Joan Jacobs Brumberg describes in *The Body Project,* “Despite the threat of ill health, college girls in the 1920s worked hard to become slender. Instead of writing home happily about weight gain and abundant eating, as female collegians had done in the 1880s and 1890s, young women at elite schools such

as Smith debated the virtues of different diet plans and worried about gaining weight." (Brumberg 1997, 99) The time of Lillian Russell (see my "searching for fat beauty" section in this project for more on Russell) had ended, and a new era of "svelte", as Brumberg calls it, was ushered in.

It might be difficult for us to even imagine a time when college girls were not stressed about their weight. This shift was not limited to college campuses, as Brumberg continues, "Popular serial fiction for younger girls, such as Grace Harlow and Nancy Drew, now had a fat character who served as a humorous foil to the well-liked, smart protagonist, who was always slim." (Brumberg 1997, 99) This trend, as we can witness in examples like Sookie from *Gilmore Girls*, or Rosie O'Donnell's character in *A League of Their Own,* or even Retta's character Donna in *Parks and Recreation,* would have a longer lifespan than likely anyone could imagine at the time.

Brumberg, like Finch, tracks this shift in the feminine ideal to the turn of the century, when the "slimming craze" (99) emerged. She points to changes in fashion as the catalyst for this change; she says, "In 1908, Paul Poiret, a Parisian designer, introduced a new silhouette…[and] shifted visual interest to the legs. The new, fashionable figure was slender, long-limbed, and relatively flat-chested." (Brumberg 1997, 99) This feminine ideal would last for decades; we can see echoes of this type of figure in the "heroin-chic" shapes of models like Kate Moss, who was popular in the 1990s.

This body type, though, at the time, was linked to a different kind of cultural icon: the flapper girl. Brumberg says, "American women of all ages donned the short, popular chemise dress that was the uniform of the 'flapper' in the 1920s. As they did so, they bade farewell to corsets, stays, and petticoats, and they began to diet, or internalize

control of the body. This set the stage for… 'the century of svelte.'" (Brumberg 1997, 99) This concept of internalized control is central for feminist scholars who theorize about the body (like Bordo, Bartky, and Young - whose contributions I'll shortly discuss) and by building on Foucault's ideas about the "docile body," they lay the groundwork by which to understand the ways power manifests and is enacted upon women's bodies.

Nowadays, of course, the "anorectic" ideal is not the only kind of fat-free body women and girls strive for. Brumberg says, about the "hard" body ideal, "In this aesthetic, the traditional softness of the female body is devalued in favor of toning, muscles, and strength. Instead of poetic tributes to the velvet breast or the silken thigh, we give our highest praise to body parts whose textures suggest metal and building material." (Brumberg 1997, 123) The desire for a "hard" body opens a whole new way for women to be deficient in their physical selves; it paves the way for "The Biggest Loser" and famous sadist and trainer Jillian Michaels. Susan Bordo ruminates on the cultural meaning of this "hard" body, as opposed to the curvy body, which usually has more fat on it. She says, "The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down.' firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control." (Bordo 1993, 190) The fat body, thus, comes to symbolize a body "out of control," and this interpretation, especially when it comes to women's fat bodies, breaks with traditional feminine roles women are supposed to embody. Additionally, the "hard body" ideal becomes another "fat-free" model women are supposed to emulate as they attempt to shape their bodies to adhere to social expectations, adding to pressures to eliminate fatness so as to show that their minds and bodies are under control.

2.3 Placing This Study In The Context Of Feminist Body Studies

2.3.1 Foucault, 1970s feminism, and the "turn towards the body"

Most academic writing about the body since the late 1970s will reference Foucault, and feminist scholarship on the body (e.g, Bartky, Bordo) makes particular use of *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and the conception of "docile bodies." Foucault radically re-envisioned the ways in which scholars conceptualize the human body, its place in society, and how power and the body interact. Before Foucault, "the body" was discussed (by philosophers like Plato, from Aristotle and Descartes to contemporary continental thinkers) in terms of the anatomical, biological, existential or metaphysical; Foucault opened up academic scholarship by framing the body in terms of its social utility, how it is "disciplined" by outside forces, and its historical, cultural, and political specificity.

Foucault's theories about the "docile body" conceptualize the human body in terms of its usefulness, functionality, and ability to adapt to society's demands and expectations. He says, "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved." (Foucault 1975, 136) Foucault uses examples such as the soldier in training and the attentive pupil in school in order to illustrate the ways the body is trained to conform to social expectations. A body is made docile when it is malleable enough to conform to these expectations easily, and eventually to internalize them so external discipline is no longer necessary.

Once a body becomes adaptable in this way, it can be used for whatever purposes are needed; it can march as a soldier in war, or plug away as a worker-bee in everyday life. Foucault explains, "A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that

they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines." (Foucault 1975, 138) Thus, with the advent of this new "political anatomy," (during the 18th century, Foucault claims) the exercise of power took a different form. Instead of corporal punishment being a primary means and method of control, at the hand of the state, doling out punishment as it saw fit, self-regulation became the norm.

Although in his later work[10], Foucault did turn his attention to the 19th century categorization of sexually marked and gendered bodies (e.g., the hysterical woman, the "homosexual") in *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault did not write specifically about women or consider how gendered bodies are made "docile." That work would be left to feminist philosophers such as Susan Bordo and Sandra Bartky. However, early "second-wave" feminist work on the gendered body, written around the same time as *Discipline and Punish,* did hugely important work to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which the body is shaped by culture, although perhaps in less theoretical, lofty language. A major example is the work of feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin, whose work is often dismissed (particularly as of late) for being "essentialist."

Susan Bordo writes, "When I read [Andrea] Dworkin in the seventies, I thought she was one of the most brilliant writers I'd encountered, who in many ways anticipated what would later become known as the 'performativity' of gender, and who regarded the female body, quite explicitly, as a politically 'colonized' territory. The terms belong to the current lexicon, but the ideas are there, in Dworkin's work and many others." (Bordo 1996) Bordo discusses Dworkin's work in respect to the ways feminist theorists

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[10] see Foucault, Michel. "The history of sexuality: An introduction. Vol. 1." *New York: Vintage* 208 (1978).

"reimagined" the body, and offered new and radical ideas about the how the body is not just biologically constructed, but socially constructed as well. Bordo continues, "Yet, it is Foucault who is credited as the father of the 'politics of the body.' His central illustrations, in *Discipline and Punish,* written four years after Dworkin, involve gendered bodies no less than hers. Yet, when Dworkin talks about the discipline of the body required by the 'art' of femininity, her work is read as having implications for women and the peculiarities of their condition, while when Foucault talks about the training of the soldier, it is read as gender-neutral and broadly applicable." (Bordo 1996) In humanities and social science graduate classes across the country and perhaps the world, Foucault is cited as the preeminent scholar who changed our ideas about the body in society, and the ways power and the body interplay. Why is Andrea Dworkin (along with other feminist theorists who "deconstruct" the social training regarding the gendered body, such as Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch)* not cited? These works have even largely disappeared from the feminist canon, let alone the philosophical canon.

In 1974, Dworkin wrote in *Woman Hating,* "Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* And, of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one." (Dworkin 1974, 113, emphasis original) This is an idea that Sandra Bartky later develops. But she uses Foucault's theories as the underpinning for her feminist analysis of bodily movement and freedom, and doesn't mention Dworkin or Germaine Greer's work on the relationship between

training in bodily femininity and what Greer describes as a psychological, intellectual, and sexual "castration." (Greer 1971) Dworkin and Greer, as Bordo claims, are "ghettoized" in the world of philosophy and relegated to the realm of "women's issues."

Dworkin did theoretical work which radically deconstructed the way we understand the "female" body and the "male" body. But Dworkin's claims are relegated to the specificity of living as a woman, while Foucault's work is considered generalizable. The sexism she chronicled in her books relies on the same "turn" toward the body as a medium of power which props up Foucault as the "father of politics of the body" and relegates her brilliant theorizing to that of a "radical feminism," not included in the intellectual canon of body theory that became influential in the 1980's and 1990's. Perhaps Simone DeBeauvoir's conception of "the woman as other" is at work here: the deconstruction of the female body is "other," "inessential,"; while the deconstruction of the male body (e.g, Foucault's soldier) is generalizable. It is no coincidence, I would argue, that Dworkin was fat. Although she did not address fatness specifically in passages like the one cited above, I think her experience as a fat woman in a society that is bothered by fat women, and fat women *feminists* even more so, likely informed her encounters with misogyny and woman-hating. Even in feminist circles, Dworkin's work is often maligned and ridiculed, labeled extreme by people who see her as going "too far.[11]" More often, however, she is ignored and erased entirely. Such appears to be the fate of a fat woman feminist who challenges our hegemonic systems too virulently.

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[11] This is anecdotal, but I don't think atypical. In-person and in online feminist discussions, I've seen Dworkin named (by people who appear to be sympathetic to feminism) as man-hating, too radical, off-putting, and so on. I've seen her used, in these circumstances, as an example of when feminism goes "too far," i.e., by not being accommodating or attractive to men. I find it difficult to believe this has nothing to do with her weight.

2.3.2 The “Tyranny of Slenderness” and “Feminist” Dieting

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as disordered eating began to become of more concern in medical circles, feminist theorists began to turn their attention to the social context of extreme dieting, self-starvation, and what Kim Chernin calls the "tyranny of slenderness." Chernin approaches the discussion psychoanalytically, exploring the meanings of femininity and female-ness and how these ideas influence ideals of weight and body size. Her central claims revolve around the cultural meanings signified by both fatness and slenderness, and says, "I had...a bitter contempt for the feminine nature of my body. The sense of fullness and swelling, of curves and softness, the awareness of plentitude and abundance, which filled me with disgust and alarm, were actually the qualities of a woman's body." (Chernin 1981, 18) Chernin's assertions about the obsession with becoming thin that many women experience is actually a rejection of the "female role" in society. (This claim in similar to the Susie Orbach's assertions in *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, which I will explore below.)

Certainly, this softness, suppleness, plentitude, and abundance can be connected to womanness: men and women mostly hold their fat on the body in different places (of course this is not always true), and pregnancy - that defining element of femaleness - will make one swell to a bigger and fuller size. Chernin claims that the fear of this role, of this responsibility, of the legacy of what it means to be a woman in society is what drives many women to become smaller, to minimize themselves. She explains, "The body holds meaning. A woman obsessed with the size of her body, wishing to make her breasts and thighs and hips and belly smaller and less apparent, may be expressing the fact that she

feels uncomfortable being female in this culture." (Chernin 1981, 2) And why wouldn't she? Threats of rape, harassment, restrictions on health care, and gendered expectations for home and family life all work to make a woman's life especially stressful and to some, undesirable - something they may wish to escape. I have often wanted to escape what society expects of me, as a woman. I've often wondered what it would be like to "pass" as a man, but my large breasts make it difficult.

Before Chernin and Susie Orbach began exploring these meanings of fatness and thinness for women, Susan Bordo says,

> In no place was the *meaning* of the ideal of slenderness explored, either in the context of the anorectic's experience or as a cultural formation that expresses ideals, anxieties, and social changes (some related to gender, some not) much deeper than the merely aesthetic. Rather, "the media," "Madison Avenue," and "the fashion industry" typically were collectively constructed as the sole enemy - a whimsical and capricious enemy, capable of indoctrinating and tyrannizing passive and impressionable young girls by means of whatever it arbitrarily decided to promote that season. (Bordo 1993, 46)

The turn in theorizing, in this case, then, is away from the exclusively medical explanations for eating disorders to an exploration of the cultural influences that may be at work. Bordo says, "[I]n 1983, gender either was absent or was theorized in essentialist terms by the leading authorities on eating disorders..." (Bordo 1993, 47) Chernin and Orbach worked to change the medicalized, simplistic approach to eating disorders and body image problems, and positioned them as deeply influenced by essentialist ideas about what it means to be a woman (and perhaps the rejection of these ideas). If we understand gender as a system, created by people, in order to elevate male bodies over female bodies, and as a way of controlling and limiting possibilities for feminine/female bodies, we can also understand that those who are feeling the pressure of this system might lash out and push back against it. These theorists did the important work of

framing weight as having gendered meanings. It is also worth mentioning that this conversation including Chernin, Orbach, and the medicalized discourse around eating disorders was taking place in the 1980s, an era defined by women entering the workforce as a result of second-wave feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s, and the resulting anxieties about this cultural shift.

Orbach's central claim in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* is that women become fat as a rejection of the female role in society, an oppressive and problematic role that is often signified by women's bodies. Chernin says that rejecting the supple, roundness often associated with women's bodies is also a way of rejecting these prescribed roles. Both claims have little to do with medicalized, genetic explanations for eating disorders, and everything to do with a society that does not value women as much as it values men. Susan Bordo explains further, "From a feminist/cultural perspective...slenderness is indeed equated with competence, self-control, and intelligence, and feminine curvaceousness (in particular, large breasts) with wide-eyed, giggly vapidity." (Bordo 1993, 55) Associations made about feminine features do not spring out of nowhere. They come from a society that has, historically, deemed men more intelligent and capable than women. This connection Bordo makes, between big breasts and incompetence, is an association that springs from a human creation: gender. Nothing is inherently vapid about large breasts; this meaning is created by people.

Like Chernin, Susie Orbach's book investigates the "fear of fat" and women's obsessions with eating and weight. She claims to use a feminist perspective to address the problem of women's compulsive eating. She says, "Getting fat can...be understood as a definite and purposeful act; it is a directed, conscious or unconscious, challenge to sex-

role stereotyping and culturally-defined experience of womanhood." (Orbach 1978, 6) Her book is also billed, in my edition at least, as "The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss." Orbach says, "Fat is about protection, sex, nuturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage. It is a response to the inequality of the sexes." (Orbach 1978, 6) Orbach attempts to frame the conversation about fat in terms of feminine expectations for women. She says, "...fat expresses a rebellion against the powerlessness of the woman, against the pressure to look and act in a certain way and against being evaluated on her ability to to create an image of herself." (Orbach 1978, 9) This is an important theoretical turn in the ways fat can be conceptualized, and very well may be true for some women. In the case of someone like Roxane Gay, who recounts her gang-rape and subsequent weight gain as protection against the trauma she experienced, it certainly is.

Orbach says, "Becoming fat is...a woman's response to the first step in the process of fulfilling a prescribed social role which requires her to shape herself to an externally imposed image in order to catch a man." (Orbach 1978, 9). Orbach's work assumes that fatness and compulsive eating always go hand-in-hand. She explains, "The number of women who have problems with weight and compulsive eating is large and growing." (Orbach 1978, 4) Her intervention, thus, is to offer "a new psychotherapy to deal with compulsive eating" (Orbach 1978, 4) and a "new psychotherapy" that "represents a feminist rethinking of traditional psychoanalysis." (Orbach 1978, 4) This approach, while potentially helpful for women who deal with compulsive eating and fatness as a result, ignores people who cannot control their fatness and will never be thin. Her work speaks to women "become fat," as she says, not those of us who have always been fat or chubby.

Her approach positions fatness is a problem that should be eradicated. Instead, I (and other fat studies scholars[12]) claim that cultural attitudes about fatness, health, and beauty are more problematic than actual fatness itself.

In this project, I try to steer away from conversations about fatness and "health," mostly because I firmly believe you cannot judge someone's health by their appearance, and that concerns about "health" are mostly a mask for aesthetic distaste of fat people. Human beings deserve dignity and respect no matter what their size, shape, or exercise and diet regimens. I think examining and deconstructing narratives about fat women can help us see the harm we are inflicting when we perpetuate these narratives about health and weight always being linked. I am also not a medical doctor. But I know what my body does and does not do. There is much more to the story than "calories in, calories out" - most people who struggle with their weight can tell you this.

A diet book is a still a diet book, even if it's dressed up in feminism. Orbach's book paves the way for "feminist" and "empowering" language to be used to sell diet products; for example, I recently saw an advertisement pop up on my social media feed from Lean Cuisine in which they claimed "Lean Cuisine is helping women unlock the power of the female relationship while discovering what having #ItAll means to them." (Lean Cuisine Twitter ad) I discuss feminist consumer capitalism later in this project, but we can see just in this ad copy "feminism" being deployed as a way to encourage women to buy diet products.

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[12] see *The Fat Studies Reade*

2.3.3 Feminist Philosophers, Foucault, and “The Gendered Body”

Foucault, as discussed earlier, is indispensable to discussion about the complicated relationship between the body and society. His work, however, is suffused with complex theory, and it is thus not surprising that it was feminist philosophers, themselves theoretically trained, who initially took up his ideas in the service of exploring gendered bodies. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, feminist philosophers like Bartky, Bordo, and others, built on his ideas about docile bodies and extended them to address the ways in which women are disciplined to embody femininities. The partnership between Foucault and feminist philosophy at this particular juncture was a productive one, as Foucault’s interest in how "self-improvement" takes precedence over state-deployed corporeal punishment cohered well not only with the age-old practices of femininity but with new imperatives at ever-greater self-regulation of eating, diet, body size and shape.

This idea, I would argue, is key when considering the social ostracism of the fat body. Understood in Foucauldian terms, the fat body can be understood as defying the imperative to become the compliant, malleable body needed in order to be a successful member of society. The fat body is rejecting docility by not conforming to the expectations society has for the ways bodies should appear and function. To use Foucault's terms, the fat body does not have the "aptitude" or "capacity" for assimilation (i.e., thinness), - likely for a number of reasons. So, the fat body becomes marginalized, less useful, lacking in its utility, and thus less important to society's functionings. The fat body then becomes a symbol for failure, especially if we conceive of bodies exclusively

in terms of their capacity for self-improvement and utility. For example, this ad below from the animal rights organization PETA famously positioned the fat body as the unethical, failed body, and offers vegetarianism as a solution:

Figure 2.1 PETA billboard

Far from considering anything as specific as the fat body, however, Foucault did not even consider gender in his analysis of docility. In elegantly theorizing the ways in which power is internalized, however, his applicability to feminist discourse on the body was immediately apparent to feminist philosophers who had studied the post-structuralist turn. Sandra Bartky, for example, in the influential "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," writes:

> The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular. Women regarded as overweight, for example, report that they are regularly admonished to diet, sometimes by people they scarcely know...Here "people" -

> friends and casual acquaintances alike - act to enforce prevailing standards of body size. (Bartky 1988: 128)

For Foucault, the creation of docile bodies is complete when a body no longer needs the external threat of punishment to conform (i.e., an authority figure scolding a young girl for not keeping her legs closed, etc) and instead, starts to regulate herself (when our young girl starts to cross her legs voluntarily and presents herself in a way that pleases the people around her). In the case of the latter, punishment is no longer necessary and self-regulation becomes a way to avoid chastisement. Bartky explains, "The production of 'docile bodies' requires that an uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity, not just their result; this 'micro-physics of power' fragments and partitions the body's time, space, its space, and its movements." (Bartky 1988, 119)

All kinds of processes can fall under the umbrella of this 'micro-physics of power' - Bartky cites dieting, exercise, prescribed posture (men are allowed more room to spread out in physical space; for example, coinage of the term "manspreading" by feminists internet campaigns show this phenomenon is not going away anytime soon), gait and stride, facial expressions and movements, face-plucking, skincare habits, shaving, and makeup routines are techniques by which we train and shape the body into a more feminine version. (Bartky 1988, 121-126) Bartky says, “The disciplinary techniques through which the ‘docile bodies’ of women are constructed aim at a regulation that is perpetual and exhaustive - a regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures and general comportment in space, and the appearance of each of its visible parts.” (Bartky 1988: 132) Like Simone de Beauvoir famously said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Part of the process of “becoming a woman” are these techniques that Bartky talks about.

There are, of course, certain body parts and organs attributed to the female sex; however, there is an important distinction to be made between reproductive organs and a three-hour getting ready regiment necessary before we can show our painted faces to the world. I, myself, am completely unwilling to leave the house without lip color. I imagine this comes from years of observing my mother, as well as all of the social pressure women face. After she picked us children up from school, or as we pulled up to the grocery store, she would moan: "Oh my, I didn't even put any lipstick on when I left the house. I look awful," all while frantically straightening her hair in the rearview mirror and digging around in her purse for a stray tube of 99 cent Wet-n-Wild lipstick.

None of these processes of grooming, plucking, or squeezing our bodies into Spanx are *essential* to womanhood. They might seem natural because we are so accustomed to what is expected of us; they have become a second nature. Feminist thinkers have historically been concerned with de-naturalizing these processes to show that female sex organs and biological reality are separate from actions and/or presentation considered feminine and achieved varying levels of success. One thing is for sure, though - women are still very much expected to have slender bodies, particularly in the last few hundred years[13]. If they do not, they are bullied, cajoled, and teased until they lose weight or stop caring about what other people think. Women are supposed to minimize themselves: be slim in form, passive, not assertive, don't laugh too loudly, or yell, heaven forbid, and even our tones of voice are up for criticism.

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[13] Other physical expectations for women are also present; for example, the expectation that women shave all of their body hair persists. The pressure to be thin as well as hairless speaks to a cultural, paternalistic desire to keep women in a perpetual prepubescence, a forever girlhood in which they do not have the needs and desires that come with being a grown woman.

Think about all of the snark Hillary Clinton faced for yelling, or even just raising her voice, during the 2016 election. Even though she is small in stature, her voice, booming and raspy, as well as her attempt to hold the highest position in our nation, represent her desire to be big - bigger than life - far bigger than any other woman has been permitted in US history. Being big, in any sense, whether it be political, social, sexual, or physical, is considered not a good look for women. Former attorney general Janet Reno also received this kind of treatment, and was ridiculed for her physical size, likely in part because of her impressive political achievements. Women are not supposed to want so much; we are supposed to be happy supporting the men in our lives and taking care of the people around us. There is a reason the symbolic phallus is culturally significant; it does not just represent the male genitalia, but all of the social and political power that comes with said genitalia. Women do not have an equivalent, and in fact, in the interest of "complementarity" (a term often used in religious discourse), we are supposed to complement the man's colossal size with our slender, smaller bodies.[14]

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[14] Bartky also "genderizes" Foucault's related theories regarding Panopticism, originally conceived of by Jeremy Bentham. Initially understood in terms of a particular type of prison layout, in which prisoners are always in view of a prison guard and thus begin to control their movements and actions "willingly," the concepts can be applied to the ways we operate in public and private space, imprisoned or not. Foucault says,

> Hence the major effect of the Panopticon to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So, to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault 1975, 201)

So instead of the prison guard beating inmates, or using other kinds of physical force to control them, in this schema, the inmates begin to control themselves. Bartky argues that this prison, in effect, is everywhere for women, constantly conscious of their visibility

Bartky explicitly criticizes Foucault for his blindness to women's specific relationship to corporeal control. She says, "Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life." (Bartky 1988, 120) In reality, however, the specific requirements of "docility" are different for men and women.

> Where is an account of the disciplinary practices that engender the 'docile bodies' of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men? Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine. To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed. Hence, even though a liberatory note is sounded in Foucault's critique of power, his analysis as whole reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory. (Bartky 1988, 120)

For the most part, Bartky writes as though all women are subjected to the same kinds of scrutiny from this patriarchal Other. She mentions, briefly, the specific experiences of fat women: "Women regarded as overweight, for example, report that they are regularly admonished to diet, sometimes by people they scarcely know," with such intrusions "softened" by reference to how beautiful they would be if they'd only lose weight. (Bartky 1988, 128)[15] But these references to fat women, in Bartky, are sporadic.

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and the generalized cultural demand that women dress, act, and present a certain way: "In contemporary patriarchal culture," she writes, "a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other." (Bartky 1988, 126)

[15] This is absolutely true, in my experience, and many fat women I've spoken to over the years have echoed such experiences. If I had a dollar for every time someone said the "such a pretty face" comment to me, well - I probably would not be so worried about my job prospects.

Around the same time as Bartky, both Susan Bordo and Iris Marion Young, also feminist scholars trained in philosophy, began to explore the ways bodies are disciplined by cultural norms. Like Bartky, Bordo and Young make vital contributions to the ways we understand the genderization of the body. Like Bartky, Bordo and Young do not pay much attention to fat women specifically, although (like Bartky) their theorizing is crucial in the trajectory of feminist theory body studies. They opened the door for me (and others) to theorize about fat women's bodies; I build on their work, and intervene where they did not.

In an important early feminist piece on the feminine body and the cultural and physical space it takes up, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," Iris Marion Young argues that the feminine body is not permitted to take up as much space or to move through space as freely as the masculine body. She eschews notions of biological difference in favor of an analysis of the ways in which women are socially conditioned to be less spatially obtrusive than men. Recent public discourse regarding the concept of "manspreading"[16] - when a man spreads his body in public space, taking up a considerable amount of room, probably more room than he needs in a shared public place - speaks to a new, feminist awareness of the ways men take up public space and tend to dominate it. However, there does not seem to be a counterpart to this conversation regarding the ways in which women are encouraged to shrink themselves[17]. Young's words, thus, ring true when she says,

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[16] CNN Travel reported on this trend in a June 2017 article, "Manspreading on Public Transport: New Name for an Old Issue."

[17] Although it should be noted that second-wave feminist writers did this critique, it has not always translated to the newly-emergent online feminist discourse.

> The space…that is *physically* available to the feminine body is frequently of greater radius than the space she uses and inhabits. Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her, in such a way that the space that belongs to her and is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted and the space beyond is not available to her movement. (Young 1980, 40)

Men thus move through space in a much less restricted way than women do:

> Women are generally not as open with their bodies as men are in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body than is the feminine stride to a woman's. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm is his step...[and]…women…tend to sit with their legs relatively close together and their arms across their bodies. When simply standing or leaning, men tend to keep their feet farther apart than do women, and we also tend more to keep our hands and arms touching or shielding our bodies. (Young 1980, 32)

How does this impact the ways in which girls and women are judged by their size? Although Young does not directly address the fat woman's body, her theories can be applied when considering the ways fat women's bodies are understood. By using her theories to understand the cultural disdain for fatness, we could frame her work in this way: a slim body is a body that takes up less space. As Young explains, the feminine body is limited in the space it can inhabit; any attempt to take up more space than allotted can be grounds for social punishment. Thus, the fat woman's body, taking up more space than permitted women in a sexist society, is an appropriate target of punishment and denigration. The fat male body, in contrast, while often considered to be problematic (as fat generally is, in Western society), is allowed more cultural and physical space, and thus, is not as transgressive as the fat female body. Men are allowed to be big - both physically and metaphorically speaking. So, fat men are allowed to exist in public without receiving the same kind of negative scrutiny as fat women. A James Corden, Jack

Black, Kevin James, or James Gandolfini can still emerge as romantic stars of stage and screen without reducing—as female actresses are routinely pressured to do.

Additionally, men are not seen as breaking the rules when they become fat. People may express concerns over their health, but unless extremely fat, these men are still operating within the bounds of traditional masculinity. I was recently discussing this with a fellow feminist scholar and she made some brilliant observations - one, when men gain weight, they are seen as more affable, and perhaps less threatening than a man with huge bulging muscles. It may well offer them some access to feminist spaces, in addition, because they might seem a little less threatening than other men. They are allowed to embody a jolly, happy fatness, while women are generally not. Instead, for fat women, fatness is used as a way to dismiss - because fat women are breaking the rules, they do not care for themselves like women should, they are "letting themselves go." Men, while still experiencing pressure lose weight in culture obsessed with weight-loss, have significant leeway when it comes to packing on a few pounds. For an example, it has become common, as of late, for comedians and TV personalities to make fun of Donald Trump for being fat. This seems to be in response to his problematic policies and overall nasty behavior; as in, because he acts like a bully, it becomes acceptable to make fun of him for being fat. Protests of him in London were accompanied by a fat blimp balloon - Trump as a crying baby in a diaper - emphasizing not only his fatness but also his immature personality.

The fat feminine body is not only seen as an affront to the “rules” regarding femininity, I would argue that it is also viewed (and experienced) as more “mere body” than the normalized female body. What does it mean to be a “mere body”? The concept

derives from existential philosophy and the distinction between human *subjects,* who experience themselves as self-defining and constantly choosing their role and path in life, and objects (or things), that are defined by their use and meaning for human beings. Human beings *have* bodies, but only *things* are *merely* bodies, with a presence in the world they do not make for themselves. Women are, of course, human beings, but because our value hinges so much on the meaning we have for men, we share something as well with the world of things. This "objectification" is made all the more acute because our meaning and value so often is confined to an appreciation (or not) of the appearance of our bodies (rather than our intelligence, humor, or even physical abilities).

> An essential part of this situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. (Young 1980, 44)

For the fat woman, of course, "shape and flesh," as well as taking up much more space than that allotted to woman, are even more culturally defined by the "mere body" aspect of femininity, as their physical presence in the world swamps every other aspect of her being. She becomes simply fat flesh, the eradication of the subjectivity contained in that flesh not merely a "possibility" but a permanent condition.

Being viewed as "mere body" has various consequences for women. For one, it is inhibiting: "Feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing - a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as *looked at* and *acted upon*...." (Young 2005, 39) Thus, woman "remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities." (Young 2005, 39) At the same time, we monitor

our bodies *as* objects: “The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the women herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it.” (Young 1980, 44).

In his work on visual representation, *Ways of Seeing,* John Berger works with these same concepts in his analysis of visual artistic mediums. He dissects the ways women are seen - by men, by society, by themselves - and how these processes affect their realities. He says,

> To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself...From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. (Berger 1972, 46)

Berger and Young both show how women's worth is wrapped up in how they are seen and understood by men. In many ways, women still belong to men - their fathers, their boyfriends, their husbands - and must act in ways which please them in order to survive. Thus, as he says, women become their own surveyors, their own selves becoming objects to watch, closely, lest they break any rules established by a patriarchal culture.

Rarely is this a conscious decision made by women. Rather, the process simply becomes normalized because of the culture we are all born and assimilated into. It is also a matter of survival for women, as straying too far from what is acceptable behavior and appearance can bring about ostracism or worse. Berger continues,

> And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to

> others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (Berger 1972, 46)

In contrast to those who were born male, women find themselves in the relentless process of mediating their physical, emotional, and social selves within a patriarchal society which demands certain behaviors and actions from them. They are in a state of constant reflection about how their actions or inactions will be perceived by the people and institutions around them.

The fat woman, of course, rarely considers herself "fragile" in the way Young characterizes women. But she is no less inhibited from action in the world. She may not feel herself to be physically "weighed down" by her size, but the sense of others watching and judging is always with her. And although, as Berger and Young both emphasize, the consciousness of being seen is a feature of female existence, for the fat woman, the gaze that assesses her—particularly as she moves about—is nearly always condemning. And even if in particular situations that isn't the case, she may feel it to be, may see herself as fat and undesirable because this is the way she is objectified by the cultural at large. Later in this project, I will interrogate how that image and self-image functions in her personal relationships.

Also essential to the theoretical framework of feminist body studies is feminist philosopher Susan Bordo. In *Unbearable Weight,* she utilizes Foucault's concept of the "docile body" to analyze the ways in which women are assimilated, through continual self-scrutiny and "correction" of flaws, to prevailing norms of femininity. "Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress - central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women - we are rendered less socially

oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification." (Bordo 1993, 166) Time and space become organized around making up, diets, dress, working out, counting calories, and so on. The desire is to “perfect” or “correct” oneself. But the goal is unrealizable and the process self-defeating: "Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough. At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death." (Bordo 1993, 166) This holds terrifyingly true for many women.

She also analyzes the ideology and imagery that results in sanctions against women being “too much”: too much desire, too much emotion, too much neediness, too much body. Fatness for Bordo, as for Young, is a social metaphor for women “taking up too much space.” But for Bordo, “too much”ness is explored beyond the spatial, in particular in terms of the consequences for female hunger and desire. In her essay, “Hunger as Ideology,” Bordo examines the equation between overeating and lack of moral discipline and the effortless, casual way Western women are supposed to relate to food and diet. Of course, women should be thin, but they should be so without fanfare. They should self-sacrifice (especially mothers), and always be in control of their desires. Whether we are talking about the desire to eat or the desire for sex, which are often compared and equated, women should always keep a tight grip on their physical desires. The selfless, controlled woman is the one who is most desirable, and not the one who does the desiring. When desires inevitably do surface, however, they (and the woman having them) are “sinful”, “decadent”, an “obsession”: the perfect recipe for disordered eating.

The decision to eat or not moves beyond just physical need; instead, the choice — and here, it is easy to compare with sexual excess-- becomes a moral one. Embodied fatness is often equated with loose morality (Gilman) or lack of control over oneself, and Bordo's theories help us understand the moral value placed on fat and thin bodies. As she shows us, the body is never just a body. It functions as a symbol, a complicated projection of meanings and signs by which we judge one another and punish or reward our fellow citizens. The fat body signifies particular meanings and, as Bordo explains in *Unbearable Weight*, disorders and failings, of the individual.

Adding sexuality into the mix especially complicates these conversations. Bordo says, "When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite." (Bordo 1993, 110) This is a trope I will examine in chapter three, building on Bordo's framework. For example, how does her conceptualization function when fat women and thin women are represented on-screen or on the page? Are they "permitted" to behave in the same ways, as far as eating and sensuality are concerned? Bordo continues, "Women are permitted to lust for food...only when they are pregnant or when it is clear they have been near starvation..." (Bordo 1993, 110) Again, do these "rules" apply to different women in the same ways? In what way are fat women represented when it comes to hunger, as compared to thin women? By contrasting popular culture examples, I will show the ways in which rules for fat and thin women cannot exist without one another, and often vary tremendously.

Bordo’s work, although focused on the requirement to be slender, has clear implications for fat studies, especially in connection with sexuality and desire. If

femininity is defined by adherence and compliance to not being “too much” and fatness connotes a lack of concern about these expectations, it makes sense then that fat women will be judged more harshly than thin women or fat men. It also can explain the more recent emergence, on social media and traditional media, of the "sexy fat girl" - like model Ashley Graham. At least in the cases of fat women *trying* to be sexy, we can perhaps give her credit for making the attempt to be feminine and sexually appealing. But what about someone like me, who does not wear much makeup or put too much thought into my appearance, and is also fat? I am "read" as not fulfilling my feminine duty.

In my case, no matter how many calories I eat or how many times I visit the gym, I am still fat. This makes the adoption of ideal feminine beauty nearly impossible. I made myself throw up for years in pursuit of a slimmer body. I went without meals, exercised until I nearly fainted, and took diet (caffeine) pills until my heart fluttered so much I became afraid and stopped. But how many fat people (and thin people, perhaps) have been lost in pursuit of perfection? How many people died from using Fen-Phen, the supposed miracle diet pill? When Bordo says the practices of femininity can lead to death, she is not being hyperbolic. And fat women understand this phenomenon in a unique and painful way. Sometimes it feels like nothing is safe, and everyone is out to get rid of us.

Like Young and Bartky, Bordo opens certain doors which I then feel invited to walk through, making more room for the specific experience of the fat woman. Bordo writes, for example, that "the anorectic is terrified and repelled...by a certain archetypal image of the female: as hungering, voracious, all-needing, and all-wanting." (Bordo 1993, 160) Bordo claims that the anorectic's disorder emerges in protest against this

archetype, and far from being anomalous in a culture which places such high demands on women and their bodies, is, in fact, a crystallization of this culture. (139) Anorexia demands not only a diminution of the body but a suppression of desire (in fact, this suppression may be the main point), and this goal, although aimed at “transcendence” of the female body, in fact ultimately makes women weaker. These associations clearly figure into the experience of the fat woman and how the world receives her. But while Bordo extensively discusses anorexia and other kinds of disordered eating, and often makes reference to a general "fear of fat" felt by most women in the Western world, and increasingly all over the world, she rarely discusses fat women and their experiences. It is implied (or stated) in much of her work that body fat is considered a problem, for women with eating disorders or not, but fat women's experiences are not addressed directly. This is where my work comes in.

I borrow from Bordo's methods, which are interdisciplinary, as I examine the different elements of culture which combine to create a decidedly hostile environment for fat women and denies them subjectivity. Bordo does this interdisciplinary work as she examines diet culture and the ways in which women face cultural mandates to lose weight. She works with magazines, film, political rhetoric, advertising, television and other cultural artifacts in order to paint a comprehensive picture about the ways in which women are expected to shape their bodies. I will use this same approach, as I take a look at different cultural elements which combine to create a society in which fatness is associated with laziness, immorality, lack of appeal, and other unsavory personality traits. Bordo's emphasis, however, of the effect of representations on women, does not distinguish between feeling fat and being fat.

The commonly-expressed condition of “feeling fat” can be witnessed in women's bathrooms and dressing rooms, spanning time and space. Typically, those who express that they "feel fat" are not actually fat. But what about the girls and women who are, in fact, fat? Nomy Lamm, in her essay, "It's a Big Fat Revolution" addressed this issue by saying,

> The most widespread mentality regarding body image...is something along these lines: Women look in the mirror and think, "I'm fat," but really they're not. Really they're thin.
>
> Really they're thin. But really I'm fat...I know that women look in the mirror and think that they are fatter than they are. And yes, this is a problem. But the analysis can't stop there. There are women who *are* fat, and that needs to be dealt with. (Lamm 2002, 84)

I do not intend to create a hierarchy of social and interpersonal mistreatment, but there are distinct differences between how one is treated when she “feels” fat and when she is “read” as an actual fat person. Importantly, this distinction does not always correspond to the body mass index (BMI) scale, or any other scientific marker separating fat from thin.

Therefore, I cannot give you hard numbers regarding who is in the fat category and who is in the thin category. This bothers people. They want a line of demarcation, one that separates the fats from the not-fats. The problem is, the category of "fat" is always changing. What is fat now might not be fat in 100 years, or might not have been 100 years ago. We can track shifting body standards in books like Joan Jacob Brumberg's *The Body Project* and in projects authored by fat studies historians (Farrrell 2011, Gilman 2013, Stearns 2002, Woolner 2010) and we can learn from these texts that who is fat and who is not are not merely medical assessments nor are they static and unchanging categories. But what makes a person fat, then? Fatness is a socially, medically, and politically constructed idea, one that relies on the confluence of medical discourse,

interpersonal treatment, dominant ideologies, (usually specific to a certain time), as well as ideas about race, class, and gender. For example, a huge linebacker for the Detroit Lions is not considered fat, but he is very large. It's not purely about the size of one's body, but how culture at large interacts with said body.

Where one stores the fat on their body is also integral to who we think is fat. Women can have huge, fatty breasts and a big, fat booty and not be called fat. Men can have beer bellies and "dad bods" but not be called fat. But once you are *told* you are fat, whether it is by a doctor or a lover or a random person on the street, it is hard to shake off. In this way, fat is a discursive creation.

But it also has everything to do with the physical body in the physical world. Women are often called fat as an insult, to shut them up, to put them in their place. Fat symbolizes an unruliness (Bordo 1993, Gay 2017) and when embodied on a *certain kind of body*, must be contained. Thus, fatness embodied on men and women convey different meanings. The efforts to contain men's physical unruliness do not look the same as they do for women. The male gaze is a significant motivating factor for young women as they shape and mold their own bodies. A study done on the acquisition, by girls, of the "unfit identity" of fatness found that

> Through greater power given to their harsh and harassing comments, boys and men dictated anti-fat attitudes that informed women's body and self-perceptions. For many, designation of their bodies as “fat” laid the foundation for their forced accommodation to an unfit identity, imbued with incapacities associated with female fatness that negatively affected and shaped their embodied being. (Rice 2007, 164)

The study found further,

> A majority of women in this study enjoyed participation in physical education. Once identified as “the fat girl”, however, many describe how their continual framing according to the attribution of fat rather than by their actual and potential

> range of abilities eroded their physical agency. When teachers and students rooted assessments of fat girls' abilities in stereotypical notions concerning their size...they produced girls' presumed lack of strength, coordination, and skill: Once I was a fat kid, there's limitations on your abilities. You're unfit basically... No, I lost confidence in that. I didn't like sports or gym. Not because I couldn't actually perform the sports. It's because I didn't like being taunted. (Rice 2007, 165-6)

As noted by the interviewee and the researchers, the experience of being considered, called, and identified as fat are what caused young women to dislike physical education. The physical exercise itself did not seem to be a problem, as the researchers document. Thus, we could even extrapolate that fat stigma can thus *cause* problems and symptomatology associated with being fat, as the girls stopped moving their bodies due to fat stigma, which could then result in ill health due to lack of exercise. It may not be the actual fat causing these problems, then, but the reaction to being labeled fat and the decisions that come after this discursive creation.

Men are most certainly not the only ones who cultivate this environment for young women, although women may adapt in order to become pleasing to the male gaze. A study about mother-daughter relationships to fatness in Israel found that

> In many cases, interactions with the mother are described as the first through which the participants learned that they are 'fat'. For example, Amalya: "... my problematic relationship with my body starts from home... receiving non-stop comments from my mother..." Some participants even stated that their mothers were the only people who made comments regarding their weight as children and adolescents. Ronit, for instance, stressed that she was never "harassed by anyone" at kindergarten, school or "anywhere else", except for her mother. (Maor 2012, 100)

The mother-daughter bond often forms a template by which young women learn how to negotiate life as women. If their mother dislikes her own body and demeans herself in front of her daughter, the young girl may learn that womanhood necessitates this kind of self-loathing. This kind of maternal enforcement may result from taking men's cues about

what is beautiful and sexy, but it also can be a way of trying to shield one's daughter from the regular mistreatment fat women experience. If a mother is fat and receives abuse because of her fatness, she will likely, out of concern, want her daughter to avoid this kind of treatment. The same study from Israel found that "according to the daughters' perception, mothers were more preoccupied with their daughters' bodies because they saw their own bodies as fat." (Maor 2012, 103) Thus, mothers may function as anti-fat actors in their daughters' lives, but for different reasons than might be motivating one's father, grandfather, or husband.

There is a clear difference between people who are deemed and labeled fat by those around them, cued by cultural imperatives, and those who "feel fat" in times of low self-esteem. So, then, if we consider “feeling fat” to be a misnomer, and try to rid it from our lexicon in favor of some other way of phrasing, we can hopefully move towards a more compassionate approach when it comes to fat women and girls’ particular experiences. Like a young black girl is treated differently from a white girl, a fat girl has a different set of familial and social experiences than a thin one. And, of course, there are differences within these groups: not all fat white girls are treated the same; not all fat black girls have the same lives. Tangentially, whenever I utter any self-hating words about my own fatness, bothered and perplexed about recent weight gain or my clothes not fitting, well-meaning girlfriends would often respond with: “Oh, you’re not that fat.” But I am. I am that fat.

Years ago, I had a dear friend who worked at a women’s clinic and was very dedicated to creating a better world for women and girls. She told me, one day when I was complaining about my body, with great confidence: “Well at least you don’t have

cankles like [redacted].” These comments often leave me confused, and sometimes insulted. Obviously, I am fat. Everyone can see it, including myself. I cannot understand the purpose in denying me my physical reality. Certainly, the discursive meanings associated with the fat body vary from culture to culture, from social group to social group. But I cannot see the purpose in denying difference. Just like so-called “color-blindness” has gotten us nowhere in terms of racial equality (see Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* for more on this), denying the differences between realities of thin and fat people does nothing to rectify social and political inequality. And it definitely does not make me feel better about myself. Similar to race, in some ways, women who "feel" fat can pass as non-fat. Even those who are smaller fat people, or those who hold their weight in certain places (the butt and breasts), can pass as "juicy" or "thick" while those who are bigger or who have a big stomach cannot pass in the same way. Just as lighter-skinned people can access social privileges in ways that darker-skinned folks cannot, smaller fat people or people who simply "feel fat" are often offered more social mobility and access than undeniably bigger people.

Part of the motivation to deny (tangible, palpable) truths about one’s physical self, I am certain, is the implicit vulgarity of the word: fat. I am not the first to comment on the weight of the word. Because we are often taunted as children, or we see other children taunted, and the words “fat” or “fatty” or “fatso” are spat in our faces, resulting in jeers and laughter, a great many people are afraid of the word. Instead of considering the meanings of the word, and thinking critically about why we think fat is so abhorrent, many people become afraid of the word itself, and the word itself becomes something akin to profanity.

The word “fat” becomes shorthand for everything wrong and disgusting about the human body. And who can forget what Naomi Wolf said about fat on the female body: ““Fat is portrayed…as expendable female filth; virtually cancerous matter, an inert or treacherous infiltration into the body of nauseating bulk waste.” (Wolf 1991, 191) Fat itself is disgusting, so calling oneself fat or lamenting the experience of “feeling fat” are ways to explain that you are, or feel, grotesque, monstrous, or hideous. The word can signify not only a body type and size, but also physical material that we have culturally decided is disgusting.

It can also signify that you are not quite a girl; you are not obeying the rules of living in a girl body if you are fat. It can be lobbed at you as a way to show others that you are not really a girl or a woman. As I mentioned previously, my experiences with being called fat often come tied to some other gendered pejorative: “You fat bitch” (the inclusion of “bitch” indicates a woman is typically not acting out women’s roles by being a caretaker, a nurturer, or maternal and accommodating), “Ugly fat dyke” (“dyke” signifying that a woman is not obeying the rules that demand she give her attention and affection to men and men only) or “Fucking fat cunt” (“cunt” used in order to reduce women to their body parts).

When fat signifies something “other”, something not-quite-girl or not-quite-woman, simple tasks like shopping can become excruciating; they are lessons in how we are not really girls in the ways little thin girls are. We learn, slowly but surely, about our “otherness,” about how we are not as good as those thin little girls with their tiny feet and perfect dresses. Judith Moore continues, “My feet were so fat that when my mother took me to Best’s across the street from St. Patrick’s Cathedral for school shoes the man who

measured my feet said they were too fat for girls' brown oxfords. I had to be fitted in boys' shoes." (Moore 2005, 80) The implication in this transaction is that young girls and women have dainty, small little feet and wide, fat, or big feet are the domain of men and boys. Little Judith's fat feet infuriate her mother, and Moore says, "My mother didn't look at me, and with the shoe man she acted as if I were not her little girl but somebody else's. When we left Best's and walked out into busy Fifth Avenue she squeezed my upper arm and hissed that she was going to put me on a reducing diet, starting that minute." (Moore 2005, 80) Because fat girls and women are often treated differently from thin ones by the people around them, and especially because "feeling fat" and actually being fat are two very distinct realities, I center this project on those who have been deemed fat and treated as such.

When I first encountered the ideas of feminist philosophers on the body, they were revelatory because they spoke to the invisible mechanisms of control I'd felt but never been able to articulate. If we understand feminine bodily experiences in these ways, given voice by Dworkin, Bartky, Young, and Bordo we can see the femininity of the female body as largely defined by limitation and "docility." My project builds on their theories and extends their work to the ways we conceive of fat women's bodies, showing how representations of fat women hinge on the presupposition that fat women are not adhering to these standards that demand self-minimization. Thus, they are represented in ways that are demeaning, fractured, ridiculous, bizarre, deviant, and so on. Fat women are treated differently, and often worse, than thin women because they do not adhere to the expectations that demand varying degrees of immanence from feminine bodies. This treatment may be masked in concerns about "health" (they often are), but I argue, at the

core of these "concerns" is actually anger and distress at women not performing and embodying their proper bodily and existential role. It is much more socially acceptable to claim you are concerned about someone's health than to say you dislike the way their body looks, or to attempt to understand why their body upsets you so much.

Fat women have a deep and unique understanding of misogyny and sexism, because they face treatment thin women often do not. If we understand fat women in this way, as not complying to the "rules" set forth regarding how women should look and act, not minimizing themselves in the agreed-upon manner, we can also understand that they face a modified, sometimes intensified type of misogyny. Because fat women are often considered deviant and thus undesirable, men (and some women) see no issue in treating fat women badly, because they are of no sexual use. So, they can be ignored or mistreated because they are not fulfilling the main purpose of women in our society: to be fuckable.

The social construction of the fat feminine body deserves it's own deconstructive text, which is what I offer here. Much of feminist theorizing in terms of the body still assumes slenderness as not just an oppressive ideal but addresses itself to those who aspire to or are struggling to achieve that norm. Fatness, in contrast, is treated as the Other. I center fat femininity in this project, while still building on the work of feminist theorists who did the initial work of bringing the body to the fore in feminist theory.

CHAPTER 3. THE ARCHETYPES

In this chapter, I will outline two common archetypes of fat women that appear in popular, US-based media. The two main tropes that I work with here are: the sad, unloved, lonely fat girl and the hypersexual, deviant fat woman. Although I refer to versions of these archetypes from earlier times, I focus mostly on (1) the 1980s and 1990s, artifacts that were influential to me as a youth - media that shaped me as I grew up and began to figure out my own sense of identity and (2) newer, somewhat updated versions of these archetypes. Although archetypal, these cultural representations of fat women, I will argue, are not uniform, but morph to fit cultural trends.

3.1 The Sad, Unloved, Sexless Fat Girl

The sad, unloved, sexless fat girl is a staple of our cultural framework. She hides in the shadows, watching her thin, pretty friends have all the fun and get all the boys. She stays at home on Friday night, watching movies and eating cakes and chocolates to salve her loneliness. These narratives, in some ways, *make us who we are.* Without analysis, we might unwittingly play out a story that is not our own. I certainly did.

The representational asexuality of fat people (regardless of what is actually happening in their bedrooms) comes from a culture that finds our bodies reprehensible. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth,* goes for an especially aggressive description of this cultural situation, and says “Fat is portrayed…as expendable female filth; virtually cancerous matter, an inert or treacherous infiltration into the body of nauseating bulk waste.” (Wolf 1991, 191) People who hate fat people are perhaps not thinking too deeply about why they are so disdainful of fat bodies, so their reactions come out like: "Ew!

Gross! Fatties!", regardless of the conscious or unconscious reasons motivating their disgust.

Take, for example, the Marie Claire online post by writer Maura Kelly, which in 2010 caused an internet stir with the subtly titled, "Should 'Fatties' Get a Room (Even on TV)?" The original post seems to have conveniently vanished from the internet, but a Huffington Post article[18] quotes the piece as saying, "The other day, my editor asked me, 'Do you really think people feel uncomfortable when they see overweight people making out on television?'" This begs the question: how often do we actually see fat people kissing and/showing affection on TV or in film? How many instances of fat sexuality do we see in mainstream representations? Do they even fill a handful?

Writer Kelly continues, "So anyway, yes, I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other...because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room..." Kelly was speaking specifically about the television program *Mike and Molly*, featuring Melissa McCarthy and Billy Gardell (below) as the offending fatties. In some ways, I appreciate Kelly's honesty, as many people who find fat disgusting and unappealing try to mask their hatred with flimsy appeals about health and well-being.

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[18] see "Marie Claire Stands By 'Should Fatties Get a Room?' Blog Post by Maura Kelly." *Huffington Post.* October 27, 2010. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/27/maura-kelly-marie-claire-stands-by-sh_n_774727.html

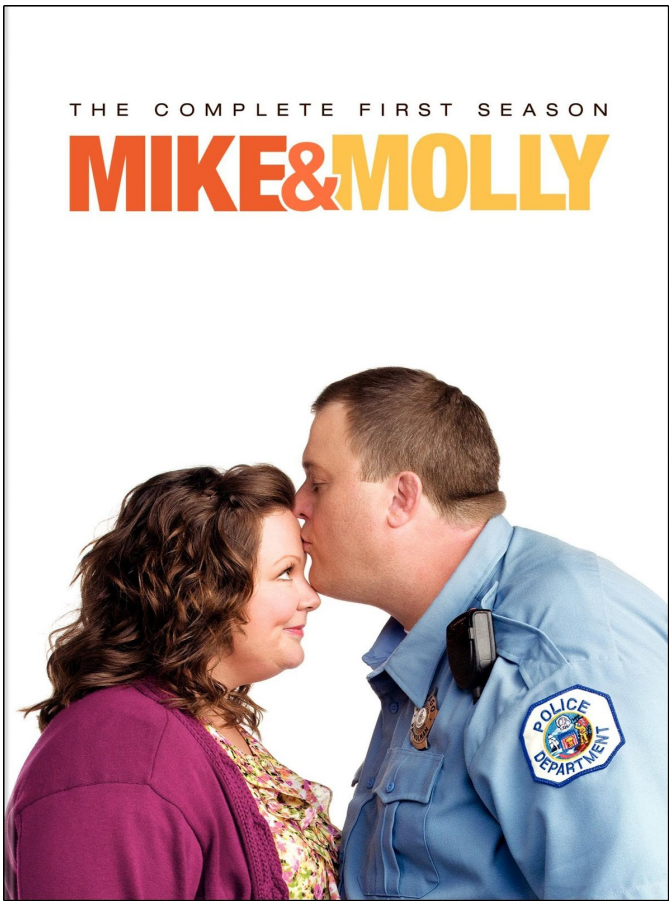

Figure 3.1 Mike and Molly

So fat people are given other, non-sexual roles to play in popular culture. Think about the amount of times you have seen a film with a funny fat friend, or a fat girl struggling with her weight so she can finally get a date, or the fat girl who is rejected for a thinner counterpart. I learned this early, from watching my favorite television shows and movies as a child, whenever there was representation of fat or chubby girls and women, it was either patronizing or horrifying. One example that stands out in my memory is an episode of the strange, surreal kids comedy show *Saved By the Bell.* I watched every episode, over and over again, after school on TBS during my youth. The show is absurd by any standard; rewatching it as an adult is a bizarre experience.

Nonetheless, this highly colorful, peculiar series showed me what I assumed high school would be like. It also taught me about high school relationships, and I expected my experiences to mirror those in the show. All the girls I knew wanted to be like Kelly Kapowski (image below), the beautiful head cheerleader and all-around good girl-next-door played by Tiffani-Amber Thiessen.

Figure 3.2 Kelly Kapowski

She had an on-again, off-again romance with the bad-boy charmer, Zack Morris, whom I pined over as a ten-year-old. The show is bizarre and also casual in its cruelty to characters who are not beautiful and popular; the nerdy Screech, played by Dustin Diamond, is relentlessly teased and mocked by this group of teenagers who are supposedly his dearest friends. He is put in situations that are compromising, to say the

least, and his "best friend" Zack never fails to demean him at every possible plot twist (see below for cast photo).

Figure 3.3 Cast of Saved by the Bell

There are other, pathetic nerds in the show, none lucky enough to run with Zack and his cool-kid crowd. These nerdy characters are adorned in ridiculous outfits, with bow-ties, thick glasses, and whiny voices, and they always get a hearty laugh track when on-screen. It seems as though we are meant to point and laugh - "losers! nerds! geeks" - whenever they show up. Zack as his crew certainly do, and there never seems to be any consequences for their cruel behavior. The popular Zack and Kelly and their entourage of rich kids and athletes rule the school, and they seem to have the principal, Mr. Belding, so wrapped around their fingers that he bends to their will without much of a fight. In the episode "Date Auction," Season 4, episode 15, the crew comes up with a brilliant plan to raise money for new cheerleader uniforms. The episode opens on a student council meeting with pseudo-feminist Jesse Spano at the helm, gavel in hand. When it is made

clear that there is not enough money for new uniforms, Kelly suggests holding a date auction by auctioning off boys for the spring dance. Zack, as per his usual antics, interrupts with comments about the cheerleaders' bodies, all while a character we have never met before, Wendy (see image below) - a fat girl, dressed like a schoolmarm - laughs hysterically at everything Zack says.

Figure 3.4 Wendy in Saved by the Bell

The other girls tell her not to encourage his sexist behavior, but she cannot help herself. Zack, ever the narcissist, eats up the attention, continuing to joke and jest about the cheerleaders and their assets. Wendy, having never been on the series before this moment, is positioned as a traitor to her gender and a sycophant of Zack's. We also know, just from the context provided during this episode, that Zack would never be interested in a girl like Wendy, since all he can talk about is the (thin) cheerleaders and their booty-shaking routines. We get the feeling that Wendy is setting herself up for disaster.

Fast forward to the date auction, wherein Wendy surprises everyone by outbidding her competitors and wins a date with Zack for $100. Zack is clearly astonished, as is everyone else, as the audience laugh/reaction track features shrieks of amusement when Wendy "wins" Zack. She is obviously over the moon and grabs him by the arm to lead him away, her prize, as he practically clings to Mr Belding rather than go with her. We next see the couple at the Max, the diner where all the high school kids hang out after classes. Wendy is excited to talk about the dance with Zack, and he begrudgingly sits at the table she's saved for the two of them. Her over-eagerness spills from every pore; he is embarrassed and annoyed, looking to see if he is being watched by his peers. She says to him: "I've been so excited about the dance I haven't been able to eat." There is a meaningful pause, and she looks down at her stomach sheepishly and adds: "But I guess that's good for me." Shortly after, Zack is suddenly struck with a bout of extreme back pain and has to go home. The viewer wonders if this is an actual ailment or if Zack is just trying to get out of lunch with Wendy. She asks if she can help in any way and he says: "Yes, pray for me." She dives back into her chair, hands folded tightly in prayer, whispering her invocation as fervently as a nun in a convent.

The next day, Wendy confronts Zack, and says when she called his house to see how he was doing, his mom told her he was surfing. Zack tries to convince Wendy he was really injured, but she rebuffs him, and says she would rather go to the dance alone, because "at least then she'd be with someone honest." She leaves him standing alone in the hallway, looking befuddled. Through a series of unremarkable events, Zack appears to see the error of his ways and goes to find Wendy at the dance. He approaches her as soon as she walks into the school gymnasium, to see if she wants to dance with him.

When pressed about his change of heart, he says: "I felt guilty." Wendy becomes indignant at this explanation, saying she does not want to guilt him into their "date." She walks away, saying she would rather hang out "with the finger food," no doubt another reference to her weight, and Zack is left alone again to consider his actions.

Finally, during the last song of the night, Zack goes to Wendy and asks for a dance. He makes it clear he is not just trying to clear his conscience, and she accepts. He even turns away a thin, blond woman he was courting earlier to continue his dance with Wendy. This, apparently, is supposed to prove to Wendy and the viewer that Zack has changed his ways in the course of these twenty-two minutes. The show ends with the two making plans for after the dance, and Zack, in the most insincere, patronizing tone, tells Wendy: "Well, I like you." No one is convinced of this, except maybe for the over-anxious Wendy. They dance as the camera pans out and the credits roll. We never see Wendy again.

Saved By the Bell is a caricature of adolescent life, peppered with laugh tracks and forced moral lessons. "Date Auction," in particular, highlights the forced pedagogical intent of the series. But while this episode is perhaps meant to convey a "looks aren't everything" moral-of-the-story, what we take away instead is that this fat girl character, definitely one of the only in *SBTB*'s universe, has to (1) buy a date because she cannot get one without paying (2) is still rebuffed after she pays more than any other girl at the Date Auction (3) *still* spends most of the dance still doing her best impression of a wallflower and (4) has to endure Zack's patronizing attitude, even after all of this. Watching episodes like this, clearly meant as a "special moment" to exhibit weight bias amongst high schoolers, only left me more despondent about my future. Wendy appears to have no

friends and no love interests, and her amusement at Zack does nothing to endear her to the pretty, thin girls around her. That final line from Zack: "Well, I like you," rang in my ten-year-old ears. These were not comforting words.

The message was clear: Zack did not "like" Wendy the way he *liked* Kelly Kapowski. His words dripped with condescension; clearly Wendy had nowhere else to be, no one else to hang out with, and nothing else to do, ever. Her dress, hair, and makeup all made her look like either a forty-year-old or a five-year-old, with her long dresses and skirts to hide her figure, and big bows and ringlet curls to distract from her round, chubby face. As a chubby girl-child watching it, I learned a deep truth the first time I saw this particular episode, and with Wendy's quick subsequent disappearance from the series, I learned all the things Wendy was supposed to signify to us viewers: a token, a symbol, a warning, a public service announcement, an unfortunate interlude.

Because during my childhood and adolescence there were not very many examples of fat women in mainstream popular culture, those who were successful in the public eye were important. They gave me some hope for my future self. One example of a visible, successful fat woman popular during my youth was Rosie O'Donnell. Today's young people might only know Rosie as the fat woman who fought with Donald Trump, but to my generation, she was a successful comedian and talk show host. (I still have my Rosie O'Donnell talking plush doll tucked away in my closet, commemorating my childhood admiration.) Now she is an out lesbian and open about her progressive politics, but when I was young, she was less public about her romantic life and her political stances. Instead she sang, "Tommy, can you hear me?" on-air and gushed about her crush

on movie star Tom Cruise on her goofy and approachable midday talk show (another after-school staple in my house).

O'Donnell's role in *A League of Their Own* was especially important to me. As a former softball player, I often watched the Penny Marshall-directed film as I prepared myself for a new season, anxiously thinking about next-day tryouts or a particularly important game. The film chronicles the burgeoning US women's baseball league which became popular during World War II, when the major-league men were overseas fighting Nazis, unable to play baseball professionally. Marshall's film is a fictionalized account of real history, and features Hollywood big-names like Geena Davis, Madonna, Tom Hanks, and O'Donnell. The film is woman-positive and frankly addresses the sexism faced by these women as they worked to be taken as seriously as their male counterparts. The film focuses mostly on the Rockford Peaches team in their quest for legitimacy and the national championship.

O'Donnell plays Doris Murphy (see below image), the rough and tumble counterpart to Madonna's Mae, a super sexy taxi dancer (see below image of both Doris and Mae).

Figure 3.5 O’Donnell in A League of Their Own

Figure 3.6 O’Donnell and Madonna

The two met at the club where Mae danced, and where Doris was the bouncer. As soon as O'Donnell and Madonna are onscreen, the dynamic between the two characters is established: Mae is the sexy wild child and Doris is the fat, non-sexual, masculine,

comical sidekick. Doris does not have any observable sexual partners during the course of the film, while the other women have suitors and husbands which assure the viewer of their heterosexuality. She does mention a boyfriend back home, though, and one of her fellow players, Betty, finds a picture of him in Doris' belongings as the team travels to an away game. Below is the dialogue between the women.

Betty: Doris, is this your boyfriend?

Doris: Yup.

Betty: Is this out of focus?

Doris: No, that's how he looks.

Betty: Well, you know, looks aren't the most important thing.

Doris: That's right, the important thing is - he's stupid, he's out of work, and he treats me bad.

(Betty laughs.)

Other player: Well then, why...?

Doris: Why? Why do you think? Cause, you know, none of the other boys ever, uh...they always made me feel like I was wrong, you know? Like I was some sort of a weird girl, or a strange girl, or not even a girl just 'cause I could play. I believed 'em too, but not anymore, you know? I mean, lookit, there's a lot of us. I think we're all alright.

Betty: (smiles) We are.

Doris: Gimme that. (Rips up picture of her boyfriend and throws it out the bus window.) So long, Charlie!

We see in this exchange that Doris expected to be treated badly by her sexual and romantic partner because she plays baseball, and therefore does not adhere to traditional

feminine norms. I would argue as well that Doris' fatness places her further outside of traditional feminine norms, thus making her even more of an "easy" target for abuse. The other women on her team do not seem to encounter the same treatment from their male partners; even though the men may not be especially supportive of their wives and girlfriends playing baseball, only Doris explicitly says she was treated badly because of her ambitions.

I would be surprised if this was a coincidence. Even Doris' previous occupation as a bouncer at the club where Mae danced is commentary on her non-normative, masculine presentation and body type. Generally, when we think of bouncers at a nightclub, who do we imagine? Probably not women. But definitely someone of above-average size. Someone who is tough - that's for sure. But we probably do not imagine a woman who is attractive and sexual in the traditional sense doing this kind of work, especially in contrast to Mae, with her tight-fitting dresses and painted, pouty red lips. Doris is especially masculine and non-sexual in contrast to Mae, in what one can only imagine is intentional juxtaposition.

Class and geographical location also are integral to O'Donnell's portrayal of Doris. She has a thick New York accent, as does Mae. They both sound like working-class New Yorkers. We see later in the film that Doris' father comes to visit her from Staten Island. Both Mae and Doris are unrefined in specific and distinct ways. In one scene, Mae breaks down about having to return to erotic dancing if the women's baseball league is not financially successful, indicating that her own financial situation is anything but stable. Both she and Doris seem to come from similar socioeconomic and

geographical backgrounds, and although Doris' father apparently owns the club where they worked, they bond over their working-class roots.

When the team is sent to charm school to ensure they behave properly, like "ladies," even as they are engaging in the traditionally masculine activity of playing professional baseball, Doris struggles through the training, shoving her face full of cookies while the women are supposed to be learning how to sip tea without slurping. This scene further solidifies Doris' lack of feminine sensibilities, as well as emphasizing her fatness via her inability to control her appetite. She also exhibits her lack of class, as it were, and her working-class, rough-and-tumble roots are on full display. Her accent, her body size, and her distinct lack of couth mark her as an "other" - she is not a woman in the same way the well-mannered, middle-class, thinner, made-up women are, and we are meant to roll our eyes and chuckle at these differences during these particular scenes.

During the course of the film, the other (unmarried) women on the team flirt and date, while the married women pine for their men fighting overseas. Doris has a couple of very short scenes in which she is courted; in one, a set of very nerdy, goofy, nasally-voiced twins thrust flowers at her from the bleachers while she is on the field, causing her to shy away in confusion and embarrassment. She appears to be in a state of complete disbelief that these men would want to give her flowers, or perhaps that anyone would want to give her flowers.

One could interpret Doris as gay or queer, as she certainly is more enamored of Madonna's Mae than of any of the men in the film. She could be read as living "in the closet," unaware of her "true" sexuality or unwilling to be open about it. However, this reading of Doris leaves much to be desired for her character, as Mae seems firmly

invested in her heterosexuality and seems unlikely to go off into the sunset with Doris. Both readings, either closeted lesbian Doris or minimally-sexual, mistreated Doris left me wondering "what does it take for a fat girl to get some love?" even if I could not articulate it as such in my ten-year-old mind.

The film *Grease* was another hit among me and my childhood peers. We sang along to *Summer Lovin'* without understanding the sexual innuendo, looked up to Olivia Newton-John's Sandy as she goes through her transformation from good girl to bad girl, and yearned for our own summer romance like the one Danny (played by John Travolta) and Newton-John's Sandy had between their junior and senior years of high school. Those of us who were more rebellious identified with Rizzo, the bad-girl leader of the girl-gang Pink Ladies who has a pregnancy scare but sings that there are "worse things I can do than go with a boy or two" as everyone at school gossips about her sex life.

Other members of the Pink Ladies are: Frenchy, the aspiring cosmetologist, Marty, the sex-kitten with various overseas armed-forces boyfriends, and Jan, the hapless fat girl (see images below of the Pink Ladies; Jan is front left, eating, in the first image).

Figure 3.7 The Pink Ladies in Grease

Figure 3.8 The Pink Ladies (Jan on right)

Like many fat-girl characters, Jan is positioned as comic relief, with her goofy pigtails, sloppy dress, and incessant antics. The very first time we meet Jan (and the rest of the Pink Ladies), she is eating. This theme runs through the course of the film, except, noticeably, when she is dieting; when the girls go to a drive-in movie, she commands

them to "hold my money, don't let me go to the refreshment stand" and repeats the mantra to herself: "I'm not hungry, I'm not hungry."

Jan is the butt of jokes by the other Pink Ladies: she is chastised by them for her goofiness, her immaturity, and her appetite. She wears big, baggy clothes, assumedly in order to hide her figure she eats all the time; at one point, one of the T-birds (the male counterparts to the Pink Ladies) named "Putzie" says to her: "there's more to you than just fat" as they proceed to clumsily court one other.

When the two dance together at a televised American-bandstand-like school dance competition, Jan leads even as Putzie protests, "Why can't you let me lead?" She solidifies her role as the dominant, more masculine of the two when she says, "I'm used to leading." None of the other girls demand to lead their partners during the dance, and all of the other T-Birds are decidedly more masculine than the goofy Putzie. Again, we see fatness as code for masculinity, as a way to symbolize the lack of traditional femininity in a woman and her lack of concern for feminine roles - one who will even be the "man" while dancing.

However, there are a couple of things about Jan which differ from my previous fat-girl examples, even though she is teased and ridiculed in ways typical for fat-girl characters. She is not completely ostracized in the ways many fat girl characters are. She has friends, despite their constant jabs about her weight, and she has a male companion in the goofiest member of the T-Birds, Putzie. So she is not completely alone and miserable, like *Saved By the Bell*'s Wendy, but she also is a marginal character in which her "fatness" is her primary characteristic. She is not cool like Rizzo, or pretty like Sandy, or desirable like Marty.

I put fatness in quotations here because an interesting phenomenon is embodied in the Jan character, one that will come up again in my discussion of the film *Now and Then*. The actress who plays Jan is actually not very fat. I think this could indicate a few things: one, perhaps those who cast the film were unwilling to hire a fat actress to be in their film. As in the film *Shallow Hal* (which I will examine in chapter five), perhaps the allusion to fatness is more important than actually having a fat woman on-screen. This creates an interesting discursive situation for fat women; they are the butt of jokes, used for comic relief, referred to and pointed at, but not actually offered the visibility which comes with a leading or supporting role. They are held up as examples of what *not* to be, cautionary tales of femininity gone wrong, yet they are voiceless, invisible, pointed at for comedy's sake but never allowed to speak or even appear on their own behalf. When fat women *are* on-screen (which is still relatively rare), we can witness these tropes and archetypes at work, as well.

One example of a renowned fat (film and television) actress who continually plays the archetypal, miserable loveless fat woman is Kathy Bates. Her well-known performance in the film based on Stephen King's book, *Misery*, in which she plays an obsessive fan who kidnaps her favorite author, is cited as one of her best roles. Annie Wilkes (see image below), is a nurse who lives in the middle of nowhere and has an unhealthy obsession with writer Paul Sheldon, whom she imprisons in her home after he is injured in a car crash.

Figure 3.9 Kathy Bates in Misery

At first, we think she might be nursing him back to health but it soon becomes apparent that she is obsessed with him and holding him hostage. She demands that he write and rewrite her favorite character from his romance series, Misery Chastain, to her liking. Annie is an unsettling character who can fly from maternal to homicidal at the drop of a hat. There is a unique kind of terror Annie inspires in men particularly; the film is cited as especially horrifying to successful white, straight men (like Paul Sheldon and Stephen King). Krin and Glen Gabbard, in their article "Phallic Women in the Contemporary Cinema" discuss the "new formula" in cinema (421) (at the time, in 1990) of "a harmless man terrorized by a crazed woman." (421) They refer to Bates' character Annie, and other "crazed" woman on film, as "phallic woman," as they are usurping the role typically attributed to men - the role of sexual and emotional terrorizer.

I would argue, in fact, that Bates as Annie is especially terrifying to men because of her size and lack of traditional feminine sexual appeal. Granted, she *is* frightening and does horrific things to Paul as he lays helpless and immobilized in her home. However, there is something specific about the fat, matronly Bates doing this kind of terrorizing, and not a conventionally attractive woman. Annie is infatuated with Paul, which fuels her rage and madness as she inflicts various types of bone-crunching pain on him. This type of one-sided infatuation takes on special significance when embodied by a fat woman. It is clear that Paul would never be attracted to someone like Annie, and her actions become even more horrifying because of her matronly, dumpy appearance. She is clearly the type of woman who does not get much attention from men, which maybe fuels her obsession even more. While Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* is driven insane by sexual rejection, Annie is not positioned as sexual in the first place.

Film critic Tessa Racked says, "...Annie isn't positioned as an exciting temptress, or an embodied punishment for lustful transgression. Rather, she is a smothering maternal figure, forcing Paul into an arrested state of mediocrity as a creative and infantilizing him as the helpless prisoner in her guest bedroom." While not exclusively a role reserved for fat women, the "smothering maternal figure" described by Racked seems to be a role readily available for fat women, who, because of their fatness, cannot play the role of "exciting temptress" that we see in films like *Fatal Attraction.* The fat body, certainly, is more likely to be read as maternal than alluring, more frightening than appealing.

Bates' role in *Titanic*, as Molly Brown, also speaks to the casting and roles reserved for fat women. Molly Brown was a newly-rich socialite who survived the sinking of the Titanic. In the film, Brown is played by Bates as a different kind of upper-

class woman, one who speaks her mind and loudly asks for what she wants. She supports Rose (Kate Winslet) as she tries to escape her abusive fiance and the trappings of upper-class white womanhood. She offers an alternative womanhood to Rose, one that exists beyond the stuffy dinner parties and submissive future Rose's mother demands of her. Molly also takes care of Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio), a working class artist and wanderer, as he tries to fit in with the rich people on the ship and court Rose.

There is also an emotional scene in which Molly demands that her lifeboat go back to help the screaming, drowning people who were not able to get into a lifeboat as the ship sank. This portrayal of Molly Brown, while a buoyant and interesting role for Bates, still falls prey to the asexual depiction of fat women. She is without a husband or male suitors, and alienates the men around her with her boisterous behavior. She is an annoyance, as well, to the traditionally feminine upper class women, like Rose's mother, who are always trying to get away from Molly when she wants to socialize with them. In some ways, Molly is an antidote to the stuffy, uptight rich folks whose world she inhabits. But she is also unpartnered, and distinctly unlike the beautiful, delicate, porcelain-skinned women in her social circle. She is an "other," albeit an entertaining one.

Bates' role in *Fried Green Tomatoes* also fits within the sexless fat girl archetype. The character she plays, Evelyn Couch (see image below), is meek and submissive to her domineering (also fat) husband, tiptoeing around him and waiting on him hand and foot until she finds strength from her elderly friend, Ninny.

Figure 3.10 Kathy Bates (left) in Fried Green Tomatoes

Evelyn is constantly eating candy bars when we meet her, albeit shamefully. She hates her life and who she has become; she has no idea what to do with herself while her husband is at work and she no longer has children to look after. Her sexuality is a joke - she even envisions a fantasy wherein she wraps herself in cellophane, trying to be sexy, when her husband comes home from work.

In the fantasy, he exclaims, "Have you gone insane?" and is clearly annoyed and exasperated with her attempts to turn him on. She is initially dressed like a schoolmarm, similarly to Wendy from *Saved by the Bell.* Interestingly, and likely because this film has some feminist consciousness, evidenced from its other plot points, Evelyn is offered redemption as the film progresses. She gets more stylish clothes and stands up to her condescending husband. She becomes a successful Mary Kay saleswoman. But her husband still treats her like a child and she does not have any other sexual relationships

throughout the film, suggesting perhaps that a fat woman's empowerment may involve standing alone, without a sexual partner.

Although this is not a comprehensive examination of Bates' roles over the years, we can see what kinds of parts to which she has access. This, of course, does not speak to her abilities, as she is often cited as a uniquely talented actor and has won many awards.[19] However, her body speaks loudly enough that certain roles are off-limits for her, and other fat women in Hollywood. They can be scary, threatening, sad, or outlandish, but certainly not sexy or alluring. This would not be such a problem if women's most important currency was not their sex appeal.

We could consider another role of Kathy Bates' within this schema, as well. In the film *About Schmidt* (see image below), she is shown naked, getting into a hot tub with the widowed Schmidt (played by Jack Nicholson).

[19] see http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000870/awards

Figure 3.11 Bates in About Schmidt

She unashamedly sheds her silk robe and joins him for a soak. He is clearly shocked and uncomfortable, looking around wildly for his chance to flee. She tries to appeal to him sexually, rubbing her hand on his leg under the water for emphasis. He then jumps up, scrambles out of the jacuzzi, and makes his escape. She is shocked, and wonders why he is running away from her. Imagine, if you will, a thin, young actress in this exact same role and situation. Would he run away from Reese Witherspoon, or Sandra Bullock? Bates' fat body (and age) puts her in a category outside of what most men consider attractive. The horror on Nicholson's face would be inappropriate if a thin, conventionally attractive woman joined him in the tub. Additionally, the obvious confusion coming from Bates' character illustrates the delusion of a fat woman who thinks she is attractive to the men around her. She is presented as sexually horrifying to Jack Nicholson in this

moment, even though she is close to his age. Her obvious sex drive and fatness combined are enough to frighten Nicholson out of the tub and away from her.

In some ways, fatness on a woman like Bates, fatness that de-sexualizes her, can be an avenue by which she can be considered a "serious" actress. Because physical beauty can often be "distracting" in some critics' purview, someone like Bates can play roles that do not rely on beauty or sexuality to define them. Despite this emerging as a result of fat stereotypes, it might work to the advantage someone like Bates or Wilson, as they try to navigate the difficult, sexist world of Hollywood.

We could also consider a more recent representation of fat women that falls into this category: Whitney Thore in the reality show *My Big Fat Fabulous Life.* In *My Big Fat Fabulous Life,* we follow Thore as she dances and lives in a world that generally does not accept her body as-is. Whitney has trouble finding long-term romantic love. Her mother comments in one episode, to Whitney, "Why are you having so much trouble getting a man and keeping him?" Then her mother says to the camera, "She has had plenty of boyfriends, but nothing ever happens. It just doesn't click." The camera cuts back to the conversation between Whitney and her mother, and Whitney, crying, says, "Everybody tells me the same thing - you're beautiful, and smart, and funny...I know it's because I'm fat, I'm not stupid. Like, I know if I weren't fat, I would not be single."[20] It's important to note that *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* is a reality show, which puts it in a different category from the other roles I mention above. Although it is the prerogative of the reality-show editors which kinds of moments they highlight in Whitney's "life," this

[20] from season four, episode four of *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*

type of representation gets closer to reality than many of the roles I've already explored, simply because Whitney is not playing a character - this is her actual life we are following. She does have sex, and relationships, but as her mother says: these relationships fall flat after some time.

It is clear from the title of the program that Whitney is trying to push back on the common sense "wisdom" that dictates: fatness is wrong, and bad, and must be eliminated. Thore also published a book entitled, "I Do It with the Lights On: And 10 More Discoveries on the Road to a Blissfully Shame-Free Life," featuring her posing on the front cover. Clearly, she is trying to challenge stereotypes about fat women and their sexuality in both her book and in the television show. Why, then, does her narrative end up like so many other fat women's, with Whitney bemoaning her lack of partnership and crying about the lovelessness in her life? As I explore further in chapter four, expressions of love and sexual desire for fat women can be complicated by common narratives about fat women's bodies and sexualities I chronicled above. Because fat women are so often represented in popular culture as sexually abject, potential partners and the fat women themselves often buy into these narratives without necessarily realizing they are doing it. I wonder, further, if the stigma of being sexually paired with a fat woman on national television impacts Whitney and her love life negatively. Because fat women are not prized like thin women are, or used as trophies by status-seeking men in the same ways smaller women are, Whitney may have a harder time finding long-term love - especially in such a public arena. Therefore, even though Whitney tries to push back on damaging ideas about fatness, the show ends up affirming some of these ideas, likely inadvertently.

3.2 Fat Black Women as the Asexual Mammy

Importantly, for fat black women, the nexus of racism, sexism, and fat hatred weave together in a manner which creates even less space to exist in public. There are only a few ways in which the fat, black, female body is palatable to the white, Western gaze. The mammy stereotype is one way for black women to perform femininity, and has long been a staple in US cultural narratives surrounding blackness. This role pigeonholes fat black women into a limited and non-threatening role that centers whiteness. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw, in *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies,* says of the Mammy,

> [she] is a formulated and unrepresentative staging of black womanhood that conforms to a white hegemonic ideal of an acquiescent, subordinate, and nondisruptive version of black femininity. One of Mammy's main functions derives, perhaps predominantly, from her asexuality. The contrariness of of her large body, dark skin and non-angular facial features to the ideal image of Western beauty causes Mammy to pose no sexual threat to white women. (Shaw 2006, 20)

By creating the images and meanings associated with the mammy and her body, white women can retain their status as "beautiful" while neutralizing perceived threat of black women's sexuality. The asexual mammy figure features prominently in cultural iconography such as "Gone With the Wind," wherein the mammy character provides stark contrast to the white, ideal femininity of leading lady Scarlett O'Hara (Shaw 2006, 20). Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought* defines the mammy as

> the first controlling image applied to African American women…[mammy is] the faithful, obedient servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. (Collins, quoted in Shaw 2006, 19-20)

The mammy's fat, black body is read as caring, maternal, and always available to the white people whom she so dutifully serves. The mammy also functions as an oppositional representation by which white femininity is created. Shaw says,

> The fictional image of the large Mammy, lumbering around the plantation great house, an image reproduced in films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1936), also serves the white patriarchy by helping to more firmly define patriarchal imperatives for white women. As the physical embodiment of features rejected by Western beauty criteria, Mammy becomes a shadow against which white women's beauty may be foregrounded. As a dominant image of the "other," Mammy helps to sustain the rhizomatic connections of economic, gendered, and racial oppression by defining the opposing physical standards by which white female identity is formed. (Shaw 2006, 20)

The mammy's body - her blackness, her fat, her facial features - all work in contrast to the white, fragile, delicate white femininity embodied by characters like Scarlett O'Hara. The one cannot exist as they are without the other to highlight and showcase difference. White femininity, at least in the United States, is in part defined by this contrast to blackness.

Shaw continues, "In the role of domestic caretaker, she represents the ultimate state of black allegiance to whiteness: the ready availability of nurture despite her own economic oppression effected by those she must serve." (Shaw 2006, 21) The mammy creation in the white cultural imagination works to quell anxieties about black sexual deviance and justifies the capture and continued captivity and exploitation of black folks by white people. Shaw explains, "Her fatness signals an infinite reserve of maternal dedication, suggesting an *inability* of black women to be oppressed since their supply of strength, love, and other emotional resources can never be depleted." (Shaw 2006, 21) Thus, the mammy stereotype also cultivates a cultural narrative in which fat, black

women are unable to express grievances about their place in society, lest they transgress the mammy role and face backlash.

The one-dimensional mammy caricature exists solely to cater and care for the white people for whom she works. Not only does her existence, as Collins explains, justify the economic exploitation of black women in the US, but she also exists as respectable figurehead that can be used as ammunition against fat, black women who resist catering to whiteness. The mammy role effectively boxes fat, black women into a tiny, constrained social space that forbids them the nuance and complexity that comes with being fully human. The mammy's asexuality is central to this caricature of fat, black women. Her sexuality must be non-threatening to the white people around her in order for her to serve them so dutifully. As we can see in *Gone With The Wind* (or a more recent version of the mammy presented in *The Help*), white women's sexual appeal, in part, depends on this contrast to the mammy. Deep-seeded anxieties around black peoples' sexuality creates the desire to frame black women as asexual, therefore eliminating them as potential sexual threats.

The novel *Push* by Sapphire gives us a look into the life of a young, fat, black girl. Precious, the main character and the narrator, is a survivor of rape and incest, carrying two children conceived through sexual abuse perpetrated by her father. She is illiterate and lives in poverty with her physically and sexually abusive mother in New York. Precious discovers later in the novel that she contracted HIV from her father. Precious is also fat. She tells us, “Second grade I is fat. Thas when fart sounds and pig grunt sounds start. No boyfriends no girlfriends.” (Sapphire 1996, 38) Precious is big at a young age; the other kids do not take kindly to her size. There is no talk about Precious’

voluptuousness, or tantalizing curves, or the like. Precious is just fat and she is hated and hates herself for it.

However, fat comes up over and over again as she tells her story. Precious says “I hear kids at school. Boy say I’m laffing ugly. He say, ‘Claireece [her first name] is so ugly she laffing ugly.’ His fren’ say, ‘No, that fat bitch is crying ugly.’ Laff laff.” (Sapphire 1996, 12) Precious considers herself ugly, not only because of her fatness, but also because of her dark skin. The combination of fatness and blackness work in tandem so Precious thinks is she attractive to no one, and might not ever be. She is rendered asexual due to her size, even though her father takes her body and uses it however he wishes, impregnating her and infecting her with HIV. This turn of events points to an even more treacherous reality for fat black women: because of legacies of slavery, black women's bodies are more publicly available for use and misuse by men, sometimes even the men closest to them.

Precious' hypervisible, public, fat body is readily available to her father, who rapes her as a child, and considered asexual by her peers. Her fat flesh is used only as a tool of pleasure by her father; she has no say in how her body is used. Precious thus embodies the role of the asexual mammy, a woman whose body functions in service to everyone around her, but never herself. She becomes a symbol rather than a human, something to be used and degraded rather than a human woman with agency and voice. Precious' flesh is for getting off on, and her body is a joke to those around her. She is rendered perhaps even more asexual when she contracts HIV from her father, further limiting the sexual contact she might have in the future.

3.3 The Annoying, Immature Fat Girl

An extension of the asexual fat woman, or perhaps just a younger version of her, is the immature and annoying fat girl, present in youth-oriented media which features younger girls who are near to or have yet to reach puberty. This type of character, like others I have discussed here, serves as a punching bag and as the butt of jokes for the other characters, and by extension, the audience. She is not quite a sidekick, but is definitely not an aspirational, main character. Jan from *Grease* could be viewed as an older version of this character, as could Wendy, from the kids' television show *Saved By The Bell*, who I mentioned above. So also could a main character from a childhood favorite of mine: the 1995 film *Now and Then.* I last watched this movie when I was about twelve, but as a young girl, I watched it *a lot.* Like, all the time. As in, have your friends over and watch it repeatedly and play it every day during summer vacation. My sister loved it, too, so it was on heavy rotation for a few years during our girlhoods and adolescence. To quickly summarize: the film tells the story of four childhood friends (see image below of the young women who played the girls as children) who go their separate ways but come back together during a summer when one of them becomes pregnant. They meet up twenty-some years after a particularly memorable summer; and after introducing the characters via inner monologue and a reunion scene, we flash back to that infamous summer and stay in flashback-mode for most of the film's running time.

Figure 3.12 The girls from Now and Then (Chrissy is second from right)

The girls grow up in small-town Indiana and learn about love, lust, disappointment, and life during the summer of 1970. Each girl is an archetype, and all of us girls who watched again and again picked which girl with whom we identified most. All of the girls are white, so I imagine this game did not work as well for young girls of color. We white girls, though, like we would later choose which *Sex and the City* characters best reflected our personalities, we had to *be* one of the girls. Christina Ricci and Rosie O'Donnell played the tomboy - tough, masculine Roberta, who would rather kick a boy's butt than play footsie. Thora Birch and Melanie Griffith play Teeny, a feminine, glamorous daughter of country-clubbers who is obsessed with Hollywood, and later goes on to become a starlet. Demi Moore and Gaby Hoffman are Samantha, a thoughtful, angsty girl whose parents are going through a divorce. She comforts herself with her imagination, science fiction books, and later becomes a writer.

Then there's Chrissy, played by Ashleigh Aston Moore and Rita Wilson, who is the high-maintenance, hyper-feminine fat girl, complaining all the time, is constantly eating, and is the butt of the other girls' relentless fat jokes. Even after so many years, I

remembered each and every plot turn. I also remembered the sadness I felt watching the girls treat Chrissy with such disdain. Interestingly, Chrissy is not fat when she grows up, but the tomboy-ish Roberta, played by Rosie O'Donnell, is. Both Chrissy and Roberta, in specific ways, do not fulfill the feminine role as prescribed by culture: Chrissy is fat and constantly eating, and Roberta acts like a boy because her mother died when she was young, as we learn, and thus had no female role model.

Chrissy compensates for her fatness by presenting as hyper-feminine, but is painfully immature, unlike the glamourous and hyper-feminine Teeny. Teeny seems worldly and mature, while Chrissy seems like annoying child, complete with a kind of arrested development. Chrissy dons pigtails and all kinds of childlike pink, ruffly clothing, looking more like a seven year old than a twelve year old. She is curious but uninformed about sex, which leads to more ridicule and torment from her friends. She is referred to as "lard butt" and when two of the girls, in Chrissy's absence, ask each other who they would kill first if they were stranded and had to resort to eating one another, Teeny says, "Chrissy, because she would feed more people." Chrissy whines and moans during the girls' assorted adventures, and moves more slowly than the other girls, even requiring a head start from Roberta as they run away from some boys after a prank. When her friends berate her for eating a Twinkie and lazing around while they are hard at work painting a neighborhood garage door, she reminds them that she must "eat every few hours or else she gets nauseous," which produces groans and eye-rolls from the other girls.

Films like *Now and Then* were instrumental in forming attitudes of girls and women like me. I mentioned already that my sister loved this film as much, or maybe

even more, than I did. When I told her I was watching it again for this project, she cheered. But when I brought up the treatment of Chrissy and the film's general attitude towards Chrissy's chubby body, my sister agreed wholeheartedly. She even echoed my sentiment about having to identify with one of the characters, and how she always identified her best friend as Chrissy, and told her as much on a regular basis. She reflected about this while she was on the phone with me, expressing sadness and remorse for having told her best friend she *was* Chrissy, and therefore, by extension, a fat prude.

She wondered, while we spoke, how it must have felt for her friend to be "the fat one." I, being four years older than my sister and her friends, was a regular babysitter for most of them. I remember babysitting her best friend around the time *Now and Then* was released. I also remember lamenting with her about our bodies, complaining, and wishing we were thinner. I told my sister this as we talked, in 2017, reflecting on *Now and Then* as cultural force in our lives. She sighed, sadly. She loved her best friend, and surely did not mean to hurt her. She just did not have to think about these things in the same ways we fat and chubby girls did. My sister is tall, thin, blue-eyed and blonde-haired; my father always jokes that she was the child of the milkman. She lives, and has always lived, in a different reality from mine.

To be truthful, if I were to identify honestly with any of the *Now and Then* girls, I would be something of a cross between the tomboy-ish Roberta and the nerdy, introspective writer Sam. They were the archetypes with which I more strongly related, but because of my chubby body, I could not be anyone other than Chrissy. This is the issue fat girls come up against: we experience this pigeonholing, boxed into annoying or unrealistic caricatures in which fatness is our defining attribute. Our minds, our ideas, our

passions - they all go on the back burner or are completely erased. Our bodies are what matter most, and not in a good way. This process by which we learn about ourselves from cultural elements is not unlike what women and girls go through in other ways, especially when they learn that their bodies are often more important than their minds. Or when a black girl learns about her blackness - this slow but painful process of learning she is the "Other" in the United States, and that her blackness works a symbol in ways she has yet to understand.

Fatness does not symbolize the same things as blackness, and of course, they intersect in dynamic and important ways. And in a film like *Now and Then*, blackness is completely ignored, leaving black girls at a loss when trying to identify with dominant narratives about girlhood created by Hollywood. I was so excited when the film came out, as there was certainly a dearth of girlhood adventure movies released during my childhood. We crave representation; we want to see ourselves reflected back to us. We want to make sure we exist, and be reassured that girls have adventures, too. I think this is especially true during girlhood, when we are trying to find ourselves and figure out what we are to become. We are trying to figure out how to become women. So when we see, as fat girls or any other marginalized group, ourselves reflected back and we look stupid, and are the butt of jokes, called "lard ass," and are made to feel small and insignificant because of our size, we learn about our future in this way.

We learn that we are meant for a lifetime of ridicule; we learn that our bodies define us, but not in the same ways as pretty, thin girls' bodies do. Chrissy becomes a housewife later in life, and although she provides the impetus for the women to reconnect, she is still defined by her body in ways the other women are not: via

childbirth. In this way, perhaps Chrissy is offered redemption from her former, younger self. She is using her body in the way it was meant to be used, according to traditional values. Even as an adult, though, she remains somewhat childish. The other three women have careers; they have moved on. Roberta stayed in town with Chrissy, though, and became a physician. The other two achieve professional success in the big city: Sam is a writer and Teeny is an actress, and they both left small-town life behind. Both currently-fat Roberta and formerly-fat Chrissy stay in their small Indiana town, unable to move on to bigger and better things. They see themselves as small-town girls, happy with their choices, upon the two worldly women's return.

But one has to wonder if it is a coincidence that the two fat characters are stuck in a holding pattern, unable to move on from the small town in which they were raised. Both Roberta and Chrissy are written as immature characters; Roberta because her mother's death stunted her development, and Chrissy, assumedly, because of her body and sheltered upbringing. Watching Chrissy as a young woman showed me what I should be, and why. It also gave my sister permission to degrade her friend, even if it was unintentional. These cultural images, as Susan Bordo says, "give form to flutters and quakes in the cultural psyche." (113) The character "Chrissy" is a distillation of nasty things we think about chubby white girls. And I, like my friends and sister, were disgusted by her.

3.4 From Representation to Reality

Writer and fat activist Kate Harding describes a sexual coming-of-age story from her past and says,

> When I was in college – long before I discovered – let alone joined, the fat acceptance movement – I had a months-long non-relationship with this dude whose girlfriend was studying abroad for the year. We started out as Just Friends, then moved on to Friends Who Give Each Other Backrubs, and then to Friends Who Give Each Other Half-Naked Backrubs, Like, Three Times Daily. As you do in college. (Harding 2008, 69)

Harding goes on to explain that these backrubs were most certainly sexual in nature, as her non-boyfriend would slide his "fingers under my waistband and [knead] handfuls of side-boob as if he just didn't *notice* it wasn't back fat." (Harding 2008, 69) Harding shows her complete inability to believe that this "friend" of hers was anything but. Her story illustrates us the problem with growing up fat in a society like ours, in which fatness is considered repulsive *and* sexism is rampant. When you never see a fat woman living happily in her body, or falling in love without reserve, you are unable to imagine it for yourself.

Experiences like hers, in which Harding is being caressed and massaged while "Sarah McLachlan's *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* was on the stereo (appropriately enough), a cheap vanilla votive candle was burning, and [Harding] was trying to regulate [her] breathing so he wouldn't notice [her] pretty much panting" (Harding 2008, 69-70) are dismissed as a fluke, an interaction between friends – anything but attraction or lust – because those feelings are reserved for the beautiful, skinny girls among us. She explains why this could not possibly be a sexual encounter, "Because, after all, we were *just friends*. He had a girlfriend, even if she was on the other side of the world. This backrub thing was just…I don't know, a hobby?" (Harding 2008, 70) I can echo Harding's uncertainty, or perhaps certainty that no one would want to be with me *like that*.

Like Harding, I found myself sexually involved with boys who had girlfriends, boys who kept me hidden from sight, boys who would never hold my hand in public. Part

of this particular experience, I imagine, is the so-called "hook-up culture" which was emerging as I entered college life. I was also a late bloomer, with no sexual experiences under my belt when I left for college. I was freshly eighteen, rebellious, and ready for sex and pleasure when I went across the country to the hippie-filled, morally-ambiguous campus of The Evergreen State College in 2000. It was the west coast, everyone was left-leaning and progressive, and I was ready to rage it. What I got, instead, was a lot of brain cell-killing, drug-fueled parties and young men who had no interest in me when the night was through. I pretended like I didn't mind, like I was only doing it for kicks, but I minded. I minded deeply.

Today I wonder: how much of my reality was shaped by my unwillingness to believe that anyone could love a fat girl? During one of her massage non-dates, Harding recounts the offer put forth to her by her not-boyfriend:

> …out of nowhere, he says, "Hey, I kind of feel like making out." Now, I wanted to make out with this dude more than anything in the world just then – I'd wanted it more than anything in the world for *months.* And he'd totally just opened the door! Finally! So here's what I said: *'What?'* I'm slick like that. And here's what he said: "Oh-oh, nothing. I didn't say anything. Forget it." (Harding 2008, 70)

The shock with which Harding reacts tells the entire story; even after the massages, the intimacy, and an actually offer to lock lips, she still cannot fathom her not-boyfriend wants to be with her sexually. She explains, "…I immediately convinced myself he *hadn't* just expressed interest in making out with me, for the very same reason I'd asked him to repeat himself instead of throwing him on his back and kissing him in the first place: *I didn't believe it was possible.*" (Harding 2008, 70) Here is the crux of the issue, for Harding, for me, and for countless other fat girls who are told they are not beautiful, not lovable, not attractive: we start to believe that love, romance - any of it - is not possible for us.

We begin to believe that love, sex, attraction, and lust – the kinds we see in movies, read about in books, or witness amongst our peers – is just not available to us. We believe that we exist apart from that narrative, and as much as we may want it, as long as we are fat this particular experience will not be available to us. Harding says: "Let's review. This guy was coming to my room every day, more than once, to doff substantial amounts of clothing and touch me a whole lot. On top of that, we were both nineteen. *And I didn't believe he was attracted to me.*" (Harding 2008, 70) The anti-fat cultural elements are so powerful, so insidious, they so dominate our emotional and physical lives, that we become utterly convinced - contrary, as Harding illustrates, to clear evidence - that we cannot be desired in "normal" ways. We live in an alternate universe, a Twilight Zone reserved specifically for fat girls. In this reality, signs and signals that usually indicate a modicum of sexual attraction are twisted into something else, so we have a difficult time believing anyone is attracted to us.

I ran away from countless potential relationships because of the belief that no one could possibly be attracted to my body. I sought out men who ignored me, abused me, and demeaned me because I thought that kind of treatment was what I deserved. I slept with men who were too drunk to stand up, who would grope and grab me only under the cover of night, and were gone in a flash the next morning. I was involved with boy after boy, man after man, who had wives and girlfriends because I knew I was destined to be a lonely side-chick unless I dropped the weight. I *pursued* these kinds of men, and ran away from unattached, sweet boys who wanted to spend time with me because I did not believe their kind words and tender glances at my growing body. Which leads us to our next archetype: the hypersexual fat girl.

3.5 Fat Girls Will Do Anything

After years of internalizing the desperate, lonely, asexual fat girl narrative, some of us find solace in its opposite. The hypersexual fat girl is ready for (heterosexual) sex at all times. She'll give you the best blowjob of your life. We want to show that we are not the sad fat girl you knew in high school. No way! We are primed, primped, and ready to let dudes put it anywhere. This slutty fat girl trope is hardly a new phenomenon; Sander Gilman explores, in "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature"

> Prostitutes have a "peculiar plumpness" which is attributed to "the great number of hot baths which the major part of these women take" - or perhaps to their lassitude, since they rise at ten or eleven in the morning, "leading an animal life." They are fat as prisoners are fat, from simple confinement. As an English commentator noted, "the grossest and stoutest of these women are to be found amongst the lowest and most disgusting classes of prostitutes." (145)

Gilman's example dates back to the nineteenth century, during a time in which Victorian ideology created strict standards regarding women's appetites for food and sex. Is this a dated example? Maybe. But compare this rhetoric to that of blogger Matt Forney, who says in his post, "Why Fat Girls Don't Deserve to be Loved": "Fat girls are sluts. This shouldn't surprise anyone with a brain, but fat women have more sexual partners on average than thin ones. The same lack of impulse control that would lead a girl to stuff her face until she resembles a wad of pizza dough would also lead her to stuff her vagina until her gunt is oozing with herpes sores." Aside from the degrading language, which in itself illustrates the cultural contempt directed at us "fat girls," Forney's assertion points to an often-made connection between sexual appetite and appetite for food.

Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight*, says, "When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite." (Bordo 1993, 110) Appetites for food and sex are often connected, weaving together in a complicated thread of landmines as fat women and thin women alike seek realistic representations of themselves in popular culture. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw says,

> One...popular media [image] is that of the fat woman as eternally hungry, possessing a voracious appetite. This supposed inability to ever achieve satiety implies that fat women have an unquenchable sexual appetite, and as a result, the fat female body has become fetishized as a cultural marker for carnal desire...the fat female body has come to represent the physiological expression of various scenes of bodily transgression and a living juxtaposition of the fulfillment of longing for both food and sex." (Shaw 2006, 50)

We can understand Forney's assessment of fat women in this context articulated by Shaw. This longing, as she puts it, for both food and sex, is often condemned as a transgression of white, western norms that make prescriptions regarding how women should act. Women who desire both food and sex, fat or thin, come to represent deviant femininity; the woman who wants too much is almost always considered a problem. What seems to be different for fat women is the ridicule that comes along with representations of fat women eating with abandon; there is a sort of "gross-out" humor which comes along the fat woman onscreen when she is eating or being sexual.

Take, for example, Melissa McCarthy's character in the 2011 film, *Bridesmaids*. McCarthy plays Megan (see images below of McCarthy as Megan), one of the titular bridesmaids.

Figure 3.13 Bridesmaids promo poster featuring McCarthy

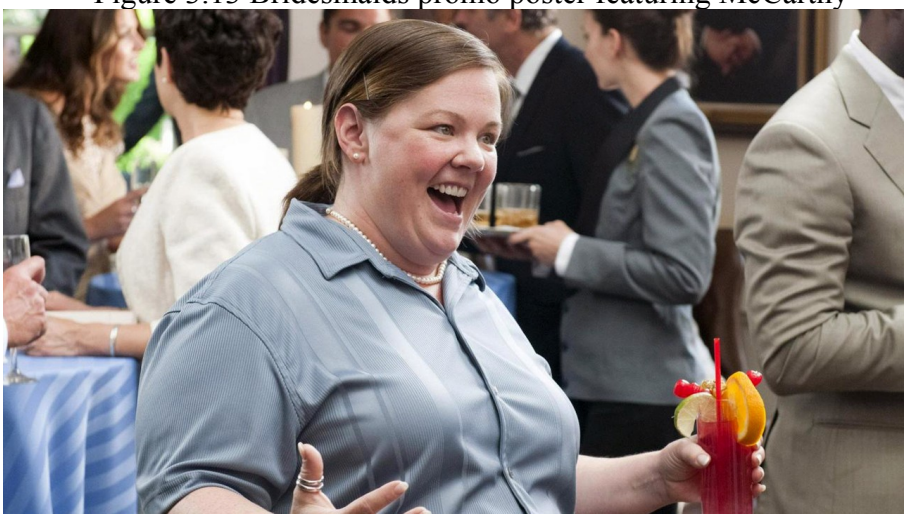

Figure 3.14 McCarthy in Bridesmaids

When we are first introduced to her character, she quickly divulges an unexpected amount of personal information. She is immediately framed as a lot to handle – she is big, she talks too much, she is swears frequently, and she is un-ladylike. Her presentation is more masculine than feminine; her hair is pulled back into a ponytail and un-styled. Shaw

explains this by saying, "The fat woman's excessive corporeality imbues her with an aura of masculinity, and this superimposition of masculinity on the fleshy woman also carries with it the connotation of sexual audacity." (Shaw 2006, 50) Embodying Shaw's theories, Megan wears very little makeup. She exhibits a tomboy-like affect throughout most of the film. If we were to question to whom she is attracted, however, it is established quickly (in her first scene) that she is heterosexual when she expresses sexual desire for the first man she encounters, an older black man. We are meant to laugh at the (obviously ridiculous) idea of this pairing.

Food and men easily excite Megan. She is physically aggressive, wrestling with other characters and even suggests, for a bachelorette party, that the bridal party partake in a “female fight club” in which they physically attack the bride-to-be. She uses profanity more frequently than the other women in the film. Her body is used as a comedic tool; she falls, trips, and bounces around, emphasizing her fatness. She does not seem to understand personal boundaries and social niceties. She is overzealous in almost every circumstance, in social interactions, sexual situations, and in respect to food; she even acquires nine puppies which are being given as party favors from a bridal shower.

The other (smaller) women are not clumsy and ridiculous in the ways that she is. When the women become ill after eating questionable food at an unfamiliar restaurant, Megan is the first to start exhibiting signs of illness, openly burping loudly. As they all become sick and start vomiting, Megan hops onto the sink in an upscale boutique and has reportedly “lava-like” diarrhea into the drain. The other women in the film also become sick, but their symptoms are less extreme and gross than Megan's. Her chubby legs stick

out from beneath her as she poops into the sink, while she screams, "Look away!" at the other, green-faced women who are all competing for the same bathroom space.

When it comes to Megan's sexuality, as I noted above, her orientation is ambiguous at first. Then, while the women are traveling to Las Vegas, Megan meets "Air Marshal John," whom she pursues. As John is leaving the airplane restroom, Megan asks, crudely, if he wants to go back into the restroom and "not rest." When he refuses, she throws her leg up to block him from walking past and rubs her calf, assumedly in order to appeal. She refers to the heat "coming from her undercarriage" as she blocks his way. Later, we see Megan and Air Marshal John's apparently videotaped first sexual encounter, which involves a massive submarine sandwich and more of Megan's over-the-top sexual aggression. The scene ends with Megan simulating oral sex by eating the sandwich off John's pelvic area, with John looking on in satisfaction. We are, assumedly, meant to laugh at this absurd display of sexuality, and Megan's hunger for both a penis and a very large sandwich. This scene combines Megan's expressions of sexuality with large quantities of food; it is a fat joke in itself.

Compare this to the Hardee's commercials featuring models chowing down on hamburgers, fries, and other kinds of fast foods (see images below from these commercials).

Figure 3.15 Hardee's Ad

Figure 3.16 Hardee's Ad

Figure 3.17 Hardee's Ad

The women are shown eating with abandon, hungrily devouring their big, beefy hamburgers. There is allusion to sex, certainly, but not in the grotesque ways we see when McCarthy is on-screen. No, these women are permitted to eat with abandon, and it is supposed to be sexy. When thin women eat voraciously, it can be considered a turn-on. We are told in women's magazines that men do not want women who only eat salads and never eat "like the boys." But this indulgence is only allowed for thin women. Think about the same kind of commercial that Hardee's produces, but instead with fat women. Can you imagine? The same exact behavior, when exhibited by a fat woman, would be considered disgusting and ridiculous. It certainly would not be featured on advertisements.

We could also consider the scene from *Tom Jones,* the 1963 British film which features the titular Jones and his love interest, Mrs Waters, devouring an enormous meal while lustfully gazing at each other (see image below).

Figure 3.18 Mrs. Waters

As in the Hardee's commercials, food is a proxy for sex, and hunger for food also signifies hunger for sex. Mrs. Waters is not rail-thin; she is voluptuous. Importantly, though, it is her cleavage and big breasts that are accentuated (again, this type of fat on women's bodies is not derided in the same way stomach fat is). Tom is obviously turned on by their exchanged - they have sex. The ways Mrs Waters' bigger body is portrayed in this film may also be connected to the time in which it is set: during an era (mid-18th century) in which fleshy bodies were less stigmatized (see more on this in my next chapter about fat beauty). But we can again distinguish between someone like her and someone like Melissa McCarthy. McCarthy, in *Bridesmaids*, is obviously fat. The way she eats on-screen is grotesque, even deviant. Other women are allowed to be sexy while they eat, offering a fantasy to the male viewer. McCarthy's eating (especially of the sub sandwich) is meant to ridicule, to demean - to put her in her place. She is not offered the possibility of being sexual and sexy at the same time, like the other, thinner women.

When people sit in the theater, laughing at McCarthy's body (and other fat bodies) in these films, in scenes like ones I described from *Bridesmaids* - what are they really laughing at? Is it McCarthy's considerable talent and skill for physical comedy? Or is it the food/sexuality connection which follows us "fat girls" around, no matter what setting? Are we laughing *with* McCarthy or at her, chuckling, disgusted, at the idea that a fat woman dare be sexual on-screen? McCarthy's character in *Bridesmaids* is offered significantly less respect - and less privacy when it comes to intimate moments - than the slender women who share screen time with her.

She is funny, of course, but I wonder what makes her character so much more grotesque and unpolished than the other women. She is so uncontrolled, and uncontrollable, in this film. I saw *Bridesmaids* when it first came out, and I remember walking out of the theater feeling so uneasy, wondering if people laughed about my body behind my back the way they were laughing at McCarthy's. I wanted to celebrate McCarthy's mere existence on screen in such a blockbuster film, but I couldn't. I knew what they were laughing at when her fat body came into view. "But it's just comedy," they tell me, "stop taking it so seriously."

These films are much more than "just comedy." In popular culture, we can see ourselves projected and reflected; we learn how to act and react from the cultural images around us. When I was young, I was told repeatedly by family and friends to "stop taking everything so seriously" and to "quit analyzing everything so much." I was regularly admonished and made to feel crazy when I started to question the popular culture status quo - what I now recognize as (burgeoning) feminist criticism. I knew, deeply, that my body was different from my thin friends, and not in a good way. And I also knew my

body signified much more than just some excess adipose tissue. I learned this from cultural cues: films, television, songs, and literature. Susan Bordo says, of the fashion industry,

> But cultural images themselves *are* deep. And the way they become imbued and animated with such power is hardly mysterious. Far from being the purely aesthetic inventions that designers and photographers would like to have us believe they are -"It's just fashion, darling, nothing to get all politically steamed up about" - they reflect the designers' cultural savvy, their ability to sense and give form to flutters and quakes in the cultural psyche. (Bordo 1997, 113)

When McCarthy's body is front and center, in *Bridesmaids* or her other films, there is much more at work than simply "just comedy." As Bordo says, McCarthy and her big body "give form to flutters and quakes in the cultural psyche." What does this mean, exactly? It means: her fat body - how it is positioned, dressed, moved, styled, how it is *used* in general - these aesthetic choices, usually made behind the scenes - can tell us a lot about how we understand the fat female body and the treatment we think it deserves. When McCarthy is filmed eating that sandwich off her lover's pelvis, we can see what "fat girls" deserve. They do not deserve a conventional love story, like the ones offered to the main characters in the story; fat girls' sexuality and expressions of love are more perverse, more degraded, more of a joke than anything else. And when a fat girl like me, or someone younger and less secure, less confident, less aware of these discursive maneuverings, sits in a dark movie theater and sees a scene like this, it has an indelible impact on what she thinks she deserves. Yet, we are told: "don't overthink it. It's just a movie."

When McCarthy was asked about her weight and recent weight-loss for the website Refinery29.com, she responded by saying,

> "I'll be up, I'll be down, probably for the rest of my life. The thing is, if that is the most interesting thing about me, I need to go have a lavender farm in Minnesota

> and give this up. There has to be something more. There are so many more intriguing things about women than their butt or their this or their that. It can't be the first question every time, or a question at all. It's like, 'Can you imagine them asking some of these guys I work with, 'How do you keep your butt looking so good?' It would be like, 'What the fuck are you talking about? Why are you asking about the shape of my butt?'"[21]

McCarthy seems to mostly avoid talking about her body, although in the interview she does admit that when she loses weight, it is often the first question she is asked by the press. She pushes back, a little, on all of the ways women are judged differently from men, especially in a highly visible profession like acting in film and television. She says (in the same interview), of her plus-size clothing line and the recent emergence of other clothing lines for big women,

> "Sometimes. I think every time I take a baby step, someone says, 'We've done incredible polling with [plus-size] women, and they actually love the convenience of going upstairs to shop in their own department.' And I'm like, *really*? They like being segregated? I bet you get a different answer if you ask a different question. Do they want to be by the tires or do they want to shop with their friends? I know I'd like to go shopping with my friends."

This quote from McCarthy in particular illustrates her awareness of the politics of being fat, even if she does not always speak about it publicly. While certainly fat women are happy they can buy cute clothes that fit them, it does not solve the problem of fat women being considered Other, both in the clothing market and elsewhere.

In her book *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud,* Anne Helen Petersen makes the argument that McCarthy's success comes because of the distinction between her "real" behind-the-scenes self and her wild characters; in her private life, McCarthy is not unruly like Megan. (Petersen 2017, 34) Unlike fat women entertainers like Mae West and Roseanne Barr, who were successful for a time but, as Petersen says, "were just

[21] see https://www.refinery29.com/2016/03/106657/melissa-mccarthy-the-boss-feminism

intrinsically, holistically transgressive - and thus cast aside as a means of shoring up the status quo," (Petersen 2017, 30-31) instead, McCarthy contains herself when off-screen, something that Barr and West were apparently unwilling or unable to do. Petersen explains,

> The allure of these women oscillates between one of attraction and distance: one moment, the audience marvels at, even identifies with, their self-confidence, their command of the room, their refusal to be shamed by society's standards. But when the fat woman crosses some line - sexually, physically - and others herself in some way, she effectively encourages the viewer to step back. Instead of identifying with the character, the viewer defines herself *against* her. (Petersen 2017, 30)

McCarthy avoids this fate, Petersen says, by acting respectable in her off-screen life, and by taking roles such as Sookie St. James in *Gilmore Girls* and Molly in *Mike and Molly,* both roles "characterized by their deep sweetness, their oh-shucks loveliness" (34) rather than the wild women like Megan. Petersen says that these sweeter, less outlandish roles function as "proof, like the anecdotes from her personal life, that [McCarthy's wilder roles] are *departures* from, not reflections of, McCarthy's 'true' self." (34) Petersen goes on to cite McCarthy's "normal" domestic life, her faith in god, and her Midwestern upbringing as this kind of proof that her wild-woman roles are not reflective of her off-screen personality. Petersen explains that McCarthy attributes her wild-woman performances to a "near 'fugue' state" (37) in which she "doesn't remember what comes out of their mouths" (37). This distinction between characters like Megan in *Bridesmaids* and McCarthy herself allow the viewer, Petersen says, to embrace these roles when McCarthy plays them in a more wholehearted way than if they were played by a woman who is wild and unruly in real life. So, McCarthy's success depends on her being respectable and contained in her actual life, even if she is often unruly on-screen.

Petersen's assessment of this divide between the "real" McCarthy and the unruly women she plays on-screen confirms my claims that the roles McCarthy plays are more caricature than anything else. I wonder: does *anyone* really act like Megan in *Bridesmaids*? I imagine people viewing the film can identify with some of the characters played by the slimmer women in *Bridesmaids*; Kristin Wiig's character's anxiety about losing her best friend to marriage, for example, seems much more realistic and relatable than the antics pulled by Megan. What is the main difference, then, between Megan and the other women who are less outlandish? The biggest noticeable difference is the obviously their body size. It seems much easier for viewers to accept a fat woman acting outlandishly in the ways Megan does, without the same concern for character nuance.

McCarthy is a massive blockbuster success, yes, but that doesn't mean she isn't acting out harmful stereotypes about fat women and their sexuality. Her off-screen mild manners do not negate the powerful images and ideas set forth in the roles she plays. In some ways, these wild woman roles played by McCarthy *confirm* all of the cultural anxieties about fat women and their sexual bodies, even if she is an entirely different person in her off-screen life. Perhaps the "niceness" of off-screen McCarthy compensates for the wild unruliness of her on-screen personas, softening her for consumption by the general public, and assuring us that she is "normal" and "nice" in her real-life - far from the crazy fat ladies she so often embodies on film.

Another example of the hypersexual, delusional-about-her-sex appeal fat woman character is Fat Amy, Rebel Wilson's character in the 2012 film *Pitch Perfect* (see image below).

Figure 3.19 Rebel Wilson in Pitch Perfect

When Fat Amy introduces herself at the beginning of the film as "Fat Amy," the two young, thin women she is speaking to do a double take. "You call yourself Fat Amy?" asks the tall, blond, thin, uptight Aubrey (played by Anna Camp). "Yeah, so twig bitches like you won't do it behind my back," responds Amy. Beyond being funny, this introductory line speaks to the power of naming and the reclamation of words commonly used as pejoratives. As most of us are probably aware, or have experienced, the word "fat" is rarely a word used as a compliment, or even as a value-neutral descriptor.

Fat activists and writers like Marianne Kirby are trying to reduce the stigma and baggage that comes with this notorious f-word. Kirby says, in an article posted on the women's magazine-like blog xoJane, called "Go On Ahead and Call Me Fat, It's True,"

> 'Fat' means 'having a lot of adipose tissue.' There are no other words that mean precisely those things in precisely those ways. Seriously, no fat person is fluffy. Cats are fluffy...my body is fat. Because our American culture (and plenty of other cultures, too) seems to be so afraid of fatness, we're also developing a fear of the word itself. I hear people use the more medicalized 'obese' like they have any idea what it actually means, and I have to laugh. ('I feel so obese right now.' What does that even MEAN?) (Kirby 2013)

So when Fat Amy calls herself fat so as to preempt the "twig bitches" from saying it about her, behind her back, she is taking some power back in a culture which denies her the ability to have control over her body. To enact this small, mostly symbolic gesture of claiming the word "fat" for herself, by calling herself fat before the thin women can do it, is an act of rebellion. The word "fat" is so often used as an insult, as a way to cut women down to size, as a way to demean and hurt us, from childhood to adulthood, that watching Amy take it back, to see her "reclaim" the word, as other activists and writers have done with other words: bitch, slut, faggot, queer, and so on, is empowering, to some extent.

With Wilson's delivery of this line, we get a critical look at fatness and the language we use to denote fatness. Kirby says, in the xoJane article: "There's this sense of vague awareness that calling someone fat can be really mean, but no one unpacks why that is. Hint: It's not because 'fat' is a mean word in and of itself." (Kirby 2013) When a word is both a descriptor and an insult, it becomes difficult to separate the different meanings from one another. With the word "fat," we can see that the term has mostly become code for insult, thus those who wish to use the word to indicate its literal meaning are often chastised. When I call myself fat among people who are not aware of this reclamation, I am often told, "No! Don't say that about yourself!" But why? I am.

When Fat Amy, so early in the film, takes back the word "fat" and thus controls, to some extent, the way it is used about her, she gains some power over how she is seen and discussed by the other characters. Kirby, again: "I embrace the word 'fat' because it is an accurate descriptor of me and my body. My body is fat. I am fat. The word doesn't hurt me because it is MY WORD. I own it as much as any person can own a word that sums up the majority of their physical existence." (Kirby 2013) This is sentiment one can

witness again and again when it comes to fat positive activism. I wrote an entire zine article about using the word "fat" to describe myself. It was a "coming out" of sorts (even though people obviously can see when you are fat) and I even sent it to my parents in hopes they would start to see me in a different light.

Many women I speak to about fat positivity echo this experience. There's power in this word, and we want it back. Fat Amy takes it back for us, in a symbolic but important gesture, in *Pitch Perfect.* Unfortunately, there are other moments when the character falls into traps and tropes which are not especially helpful for fat women. For example, Fat Amy is immediately positioned as being "too much," similarly to McCarthy's Megan. The story revolves around the collegiate acapella scene, and after some embarrassment at the national championships, two members of the "Barden Bellas" (a girls' acapella team) are trying to rebuild their team.

No one really wants to be associated with the Bella's anymore, so it quickly becomes apparent that they are scraping the bottom of the barrel in order to build a new team. Fat Amy, from the beginning, is assertive about her talents, claiming she is "the best singer in Tasmania" and when the two recruiters ask her to "match pitch" she does, but in such a way that leader Aubrey needs to cut her off because she sings for so long. She also gyrates her fat body and moves in ways that could be read as sexual, and that are somewhat confounding to the two girls watching her. During the rest of the film, Wilson as Fat Amy will continue to use her fat body in ways that accentuate it. She touches her breasts at inappropriate times, hits her belly for emphasis, and refers to her own "sexy fat ass" at one point. She exerts what seems like overconfidence during the Bella's audition, and proclaims that she "crushed it" - meaning her audition performance was stellar. She

has the utmost confidence in herself and her body, which on paper, seems like a good thing.

However, once the viewer witnesses the way she is treated by the other characters, the way they roll their eyes at her and the strange ways in which the rival boys team, The Treblemakers, reacts to her, Fat Amy does not seem so fat-positive. The leader of the Treblemakers, Bumper, says at an acapella groups' party, to Fat Amy: "You...are probably the grossest human being I have ever seen." Amy responds: "Well you're no panty dropper yourself" but looks visibly hurt by Bumper's scorn. Bumper's statement is so big, so broad, so incredibly demeaning and insulting that it comes as a surprise when he then says: "So I have feeling that we should...kiss." This exchange between Fat Amy and Bumper sums up our convoluted cultural attitudes towards fat women in about thirty seconds. In almost the same breath, this young, college-aged man has proclaimed that Amy is the grossest human being he has ever seen, yet he also wants to make out with her. The simultaneous titillation and disgust directed at Amy by Bumper speaks to a cultural anxiety about fat women's bodies which is unique, confusing, and relentless. Interestingly, Amy then rejects Bumper. She compares his offer to doing crystal meth, a decidedly unhealthy decision for anyone to make.

Later, though, we find out that Amy has some kind of relationship with Bumper because she has his phone number stored in her phone. Their relationship is complicated, however, as exemplified by a scene in which Bumper pelts Amy with a burrito as she's trying to pump gas as the women are on their way to a singing competition. The boys drive by in their van, also on their way to the competition, when Bumper decides to throw his burrito at Amy as they drive past. The scene is dramatic, and Amy yells "I've been

shot!" a few times after she is hit. Importantly, none of the other women are hit with food during the course of the film. Like McCarthy's Megan and the sexual sub sandwich, it seems that the food-related jokes are reserved specifically for fat women. Both scenes, the subway sandwich scene and the burrito scene, involve the fat woman characters' love interests, and even if we are unsure of Amy and Bumper's status, he did show interest in her and wanted to kiss her earlier in the film.

The connection between jokes related to food and fat women is certainly not a new phenomenon, but the combination of food jokes made by or with a male partner in these scenes complicates the messages we receive from the film. Why do we insist on humiliating fat women by using food as a prop? In *Pitch Perfect*, what does it say about our cultural attitudes towards fat women that allow us to laugh at someone's indignity like we do when Amy is hit with the burrito? And this treatment from someone who is supposed to be attracted to her (and who also called her "the grossest human being" he has ever seen)? We could ask ourselves: what has Amy done to deserve this treatment? If the answer is: be fat, we may want to evaluate our outlook as it pertains to the fat woman's body. It seems as though Bumper, in a character, embodies the complicated and conflicted ideas people (particularly men attracted to fat women) have about fat women. He especially represents men who may be attracted to fat women but cannot express themselves due to cultural constraints. See chapter four for more on this phenomenon.

In the sequel, *Pitch Perfect 2,* the drama between Bumper and Fat Amy continues. They hook-up during the course of the film, in secret, sneaking off from parties and having clandestine meetings. Midway through the film, Bumper invites Amy over to what she assumes is another hook-up session. Instead, she is surprised by a dimly-lit

gazebo and a fancy spread Bumper has prepared for the two of them. He asks her to date him, "like for real" and to "go out in public and hold hands." She rebuffs him, saying, "you can't be serious" and reminds him that she is a "free range pony" who "can't be tamed" or "tied down." Bumper starts to cry, and says he cannot stay in the relationship as it is. Amy leaves, and their relationship appears to end.

Later in the film, however, Amy realizes that she does indeed want to be with Bumper; in fact, she even wants to marry him. She runs off from a meeting of the Bellas, yelling, "I have to go get my man!" Then the two are featured in a dramatic scene in which Amy sings "We Belong Together" to Bumper while rowing a boat to find him. He resists her solicitations, seemingly firm in his resolve. Towards the end of the scene (and the song), he finally joins in and sings with Amy, and they embrace, falling onto the ground in embrace, frantically kissing and groping one another. There are a few things to be said about this plot development. One, Fat Amy seems to be firmly committed to her aggressive sexuality, regardless of her relationship status. With or without Bumper, Amy is hypersexual and sexually voracious. Two, it is depressing, to say the least, that Amy ends up with a man who once called her "the grossest human being he has ever seen." Rebel Wilson, and Amy, did not change in appearance from one film to the next. It is understood, in the film, that Bumper is not an especially upstanding guy, and I cannot help but be saddened that Amy would choose someone who so belligerently demeaned her, both with his statement in the previous film and the flung burrito. Three, it seems as though the very fact that Amy would be in a relationship at all is meant to be humorous, as evidenced by this scene with Bumper.

When talking to my friend - a fellow feminist scholar - about my project, she told me I should watch *Pitch Perfect 2* and that the big joke *was* Bumper and Amy's relationship. As in: how funny for a fat girl to be in a relationship. I am not sure what the intentions of the producers and director were, but it seems very possible. It is also worth mentioning that the film opens with the Bellas on the top of their game, performing for President Obama in Washington, DC. They fall from grace, however, when Amy appears onstage, dangling from the ceiling, and her costume rips, showing the audience, the President, and First Lady her naked butt and vagina. The crowd actually gasps and shrieks in horror at her body, covering their eyes and wailing in despair. The team is suspended from competition and spend the rest of the film trying to redeem themselves. In this opening scene, it is made abundantly clear that Amy's body is so grotesque, so abject, that it literally causes the Bella's (temporary) downfall. Amy herself is contrite, shouldering the blame for the team's national embarrassment.

Our cultural attitudes towards fat women's bodies and sexual organs are on full display here. Would the audience react with such horror and disgust if one of the thin characters, like Anna Kendrick's Beca, had done the same? I would argue that a thin character and actor would not even be put in this situation, because the body of a thin woman does not have the same cultural resonance as a fat woman's. As a comparison, we could consider a scene in the 2017 film *Girls Trip*, in which both Jada Pinkett Smith and Tiffany Haddish's characters zipline over New Orleans' Bourbon Street, peeing on the revelers below. The scene can be understood as an answer to white prudishness; one of the writers of *Girls Trip*, Tracy Oliver, told *The Hollywood Reporter* "she wanted to break down the barriers of respectability politics and portray 'black women being carefree

and having fun just like everybody else.[22]'" Thus, the scene in Girls Trip can be viewed as a rejection of the the strict moral standards black women are often required to uphold in order to survive under white supremacy. Both movies deploy a kind of "bad girls gross-out humor;" however, the horror expressed by the women peeing is not exclusively about the women's genitals, it is about the peeing, and may very well be a rejection of white standards which are imposed on black women's bodies and behavior. But Fat Amy does not pee, or poop, or excrete in any way; her body itself is the horror, not what is coming out of it.

Rebel Wilson (who plays Fat Amy) says, in *US Magazine,* of her weight, "One time I got X-rayed by a chiropractor and he goes, 'You know, you don't actually have a big build...It's like, you're just fat!… I took something that was seen as a disadvantage — no one thinks, if you're fat, that you're going to be an actress and everyone's going to love you — and turned it into a positive." She continues, "Bigger girls do better in comedy. I don't know why. Maybe because people find it easier to laugh. It's very hard to laugh at someone who's very attractive, I think. And normally those people don't have a great personality anyway."[23] Here, Wilson makes her weight into a positive, something unique and different in traditionally thin-obsessed Hollywood. Interestingly, she turns it around on thin women, insinuating that they are less funny, less interesting, or less easy to laugh at. A more pessimistic view might be: fat women are ghettoized in Hollywood, and are

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22 https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/girls-trip-stars-celebrate-sisterhood-at-la-premiere-1021169

23 https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/rebel-wilson-im-just-fat-and-bigger-girls-do-better-in-comedy-2015271/

only useful if they play characters that are ridiculed or pitied. It is understandable that Wilson would want to frame her position more positively.

The 2017 film *Rough Night* seemed to cater to the lucrative market evidenced by the successes of films like *Bridesmaids* and *Pitch Perfect* and similarly features an almost all-woman cast with women behaving badly. The film centers around a bachelorette party for Jess, played by Scarlett Johansson, and her ragtag group of lady friends as they head to Miami for some wild-girl party time. This time, the fat-girl character, Alice, is played by Jillian Bell and is the catalyst for the party weekend. We immediately learn that Alice has earned the title "footjob girl" because she made a sexual partner climax just by using her feet. We see the group of women friends gathered in her college dorm room, and during the course of the scene not just one but *two* of Alice's vibrators go off, causing commotion among the group.

Alice is uncontrollable, and uncontrolled. In fact, she is "lethally horny" according to her friends, and even causes the death of a hired stripper (who turns out to be a criminal, therefore absolving the girls of their crimes) by jumping on him in excitement after Jess rebuffs his attempts to grind on her. He bumps his head on the fireplace and is killed by the force of Alice's big body, and so the party takes a dark turn. The film, in some ways, subverts masculine tropes of men behaving badly at bachelor parties in Vegas, and could be read as a pseudo-feminist response to the 1998 film *Very Bad Things,* in which the men at a bachelor party have to cover up the murder of a woman stripper they hired for the groom to-be. There are certainly feminist themes at work in *Rough Night*, and *Broad City'*s Ilana Glazer's character, Frankie, is an activist with a seemingly comprehensive grasp of modern feminist and anti-racist activist

discourse. But, as I said to my husband as we watched the film together, I guess even feminists hate fat people.

Alice's hypersexuality and over-the-top-ness is relentless during the course of *Rough Night.* As she and Jess arrive at the airport to depart for Miami, she screams "Shots! Shots shots shot shots!" as Jess pulls up to the curb with her fiance. Alice proclaims that when the women get to Miami, they will be "swimming in dicks," to the embarrassment of Jess and eliciting mild concern from Jess' submissive, beta-male fiance, Peter (played by Paul W Downs). She proclaims later that she likely has "clumps and clumps of HPV" and is aggressive about her sexuality as well as her love for Jess, which sometimes borders on obsession.

Alice is jealous, possessive, and extreme in nearly every scene she's in. She supplies an abundance of penis paraphernalia for the girls to use during the weekend, including penis pasta (which she eats dry), sunglasses with a penis nose, and other penis-related items. She vomits on the bar when the women are out drinking, and insists that they all do cocaine during their big night out. She bosses the other women around, clearly considering herself the leader of the pack. She and Jess jump onstage at one point, in the club, and recreate an infamous talent show dance to "My Neck, My Back," the famously sexually explicit song by Khia, and is subsequently humiliated when Jess forgets to catch her during a trust fall. She falls back, slamming into the stage with no one to catch her. She also overindulges in terms of food, at one point scarfing down some pizza after she causes the death of the male stripper (see image below).

Figure 3.20 Alice (right) in Rough Night

The women around her wonder how she can eat in such a crisis and she yells, "Eating is the number one way to relieve stress!"

In addition to being portrayed as hypersexual and insatiable, Alice also fits into the sad, lonely fat girl archetype. The women in her group chuckle about how she has a depressing life without much going on - her mother has Alzheimer's and she does not have very many friends to speak of, beyond Jess. She claims, at one point, that the bachelorette party was going to be "the biggest night of our lives," indicating the lack of excitement in her home life, and in her life without Jess. We also learn that she is very active on social media, posting an excessive amount of pictures so as to seem less sad and alone.

At the end of the film, we discover, via a card she writes to Jess, that she did not "have many friends growing up" and Jess was one of the only people who cared enough to be kind to her. She tells Jess in the card that her mother was worried about her when

she went to college, but was relieved when Jess was so kind and befriended the fat, overwhelming Alice. Her mother was happy Alice actually had a friend. The juxtaposition of Scarlett Johansson, easily considered one of the world's most beautiful women, with fat-girl, loose cannon Alice, cannot be an accident. The two are constantly shown in opposition: the reserved, ambitious, beautiful, successful Jess (Johansson) contrasted with the fat, ridiculous, sloppy, domineering, and dangerous Alice. So, in Alice, we get not one static fat-girl trope, but two. While I watched the film and took notes for this project, I could barely keep up with the incessant slew of stereotypical behavior and antics coming from Alice.

3.6 What I Learned From Ursula the Sea-Witch

The hypersexual fat woman trope can be disseminated to children at an early age. I was seven years old in 1989, when Disney's *The Little Mermaid* was released. It was an *event* as much as anything can be for a seven year old. We sang the songs in swimming pools and lakes during the summer, my sister and I argued endlessly about who would get to play Ariel and who would have to settle for playing one of the boring sisters. We recreated the scenes to the best of our abilities, belting the songs at the tops of our lungs until inevitably someone's mom came and told us to cool it. We all wanted to be Ariel, the tiny-waisted, golden-voiced, headstrong heroine who finds true love despite her lack of lower extremities. I could play for hours in the water pretending to be Ariel, letting the waves splash up against me, twisting and turning and water-dancing until dinner time, when I cursed my lack of flowing red hair and mermaid's tail.

So for us little girls in 1989, Ariel was *it.* She was beautiful, independent, could sing with grace and charm, and of course, got her prince in the end. We all looked up to her. And if Ariel is the model of feminine perfection, what, then, is Ursula, the tentacled, fat, vengeful villainess? Ursula scared and intrigued me, as she heaved her ample bosom around her witch-cave, plotting and scheming with her two accomplices, Flotsam and Jetsam - the electric eels. For those who do not know the story: Ursula is the nemesis of King Trident, Ariel's father. He banished Ursula to the nether regions of the sea and she wants to get back at him. Ariel comes to Ursula looking for some magic to turn her into a human, and Ursula steals Ariel's voice in order to trick her later, steal Ariel's prince and turn Ariel and her kingly dad into weird little sea monsters. Ursula does not prevail, of course, and right before she is murdered, she is at her fattest and hugest, growing and growing until she towers over ships and sea alike. Love wins and Ursula dies.

There is a deeply disturbing premise set forth in *The Little Mermaid*; specifically, that a woman does not need her own voice in order to snag her prince charming. Aside from this gem of a message conveyed to little girls and boys alike, the character of Ursula is an important one as my childhood peers and I learned about what kind of body was acceptable or not from popular culture artifacts like *The Little Mermaid*. We were clearly meant to emulate Ariel and despise Ursula, as she employed all of the most devious tactics to get in the middle of *true love*. We thought, indignantly: how dare she? We knew she had to be so bitter, so angry, so full of rage when she tried to take advantage of poor Ariel and her husband to-be, the doltish but handsome Prince Eric. A 2004 study done on beauty and thinness in children's media found "...regardless of whether they were humans or animals, a number of obese characters are presented in a negative manner and appear

to be disliked by others." (Herbozo, et al 2004, 30) Ursula captured our imagination, and our fears about what a fat, scorned, sexually aggressive woman living alone could do.

One of the more interesting things about Ursula is her high-sexed presentation. Disney films are ripe with strange expressions of sexuality, and we all know the rumors about dust clouds spelling out "sex" behind main characters in Disney films. But Ursula is unique in her performance of the villain. Think about the other evil women Disney has given us throughout the years: Maleficent, the tall, thin, bony witch who puts Sleeping Beauty to sleep with the spinning wheel, the apple-poisoning, beauty-obsessed evil queen from Snow White, Cruella De Ville, the puppy murderer...they are all thin, extremely so, and not particularly sexual.

The Queen of Hearts is not thin, but represents another fat woman archetype: the angry, yelling, asexual ball of rage. Ursula stands alone, as far as evil women go, in the Disney universe. She bounces and flaunts her body around her cave, wears a cleavage-revealing sea dress, is made-up heavily, reapplies her gooey red lipstick on-screen, and reminds us to "never underestimate the importance of body language" all while shaking her hips suggestively to the teenaged Ariel. She even shimmies her breasts into the camera while singing about the "Poor Unfortunate Souls" who need her help so badly, and whom she seems quite eager to exploit.

There is another side to the creation of Ursula, though, beyond the easily observable hypersexed, gleefully devious ample woman I watched with fascination as a seven year old in that dumpy Midwestern movie theater. Reporting for the popular culture website *Hazlitt,* Nicole Pasulka and Brian Ferree tell the story of how Divine, the drag queen made famous by John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, who in the film eats "freshly-

shat dog poo" and "went on to masturbate with dead fish, stuff her bra, hit her kid, and curse out her parents"[24] was the driving influence in the creation of Ursula the sea-witch. Divine is legendary amongst underground freaks, queers, and weirdos, and perhaps not so with the Disney-flocking family crowd. I would not learn about Divine until my early 20s, when one of my gay friends showed me *Pink Flamingos* in our dilapidated, "punk" house where I lived with about ten other misfits. And I am sure that if I told my Midwestern parents about the Divine-inspiration for Ursula, they would be horrified, even all these years later.

According to the writers at *Hazlitt,* Howard Ashman, playwright and lyricist who created *Little Shop of Horrors* was a Baltimore native well-versed in the queer underground - in the very scene where Divine was a star. It is remarkable that such a subversive queen like Divine could be included in a children's classic, and reporters Pasulka and Ferree say, "Ursula is a plum role because Glenn Milstead (Divine), Howard Ashman, John Waters, and generations of queers and drag queens know, being ostracized, fat, and sick can bring its own strength and power...[and] *The Little Mermaid* is a pretty queer film." (Pasulka and Ferree 2016) I wonder, often, if anything can be "queer" if you stare at it long enough. Sure, Divine as Ursula reaching into our conservative, Midwestern living rooms with her dark and sensual tentacles is subversive. But is it transformative? Does it challenge, or reinforce, the ideas we have about fat women *who want too much?* What does it mean when we have a queer icon teaching young children what it means to be evil, manipulative, and disgusting?

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[24] see http://hazlitt.net/longreads/unearthing-sea-witch

It is likely that the children who are most shaped by Disney films are unable to "read" Ursula as subversive and "queer", even though some of us may now have the tools to look back at the character and understand these complicated dynamics in hindsight. I do not wish to dismiss the queer and gay songwriters and producers who brought us Ursula in the tradition of Divine, because in some ways, it does feel triumphant to show Middle America a bit of the queer, East Coast underground. But I cannot reconcile the potential "queerness" of Ursula with the lessons *The Little Mermaid* taught me all those years ago: Ursula is evil, power-hungry, over-sexed, a menace, and she must die in the end. The film sent a very clear message to me about which kinds of bodies were "good" bodies and which kinds were "bad."

The stark juxtaposition between Ariel and Ursula's bodies, as seen in the image, was not lost on me. Ariel is bright, lithe, nubile, and most important of all - desirable. Ursula is darker in color than the princess - massive, menacing. As I left the theater, and later emulated our girl-hero Ariel, I knew that my emerging little fat rolls were more like Ursula than the princess Ariel. I knew my loud voice, and my growing distaste for the popular girls in school was more like Ursula than Ariel. And most of all, I knew that Ursula was *too much*, she needed to be controlled; ultimately, she is forced into submission through violence. Good girls were supposed to be small, naive, hungry for love but not sex, and helpless.

Ursula is queer in the sense that she is the opposite of all of those things: a vision of female power, banished from the straight world for being too over-the-top, unapologetic about her weight and her hunger for sex and dominion over the sea world. But she cannot win. Many of us learn about good and evil from children's stories; these

fables are used to guide us as we grow up and interact with other human beings. Ursula taught me that while we might strive for recognition as fat, sexual women, we will never get it. And our punishment for trying just might be death.

3.7 I Like My Girls BBW: Fat Black Women and Hypersexuality

I hear it all the time: "It's easier for black girls to be big. It's a part of their culture." A comment like this was made at a fat positivity workshop I led a few years ago. When I responded to the emphatic white woman who was so sure of her statement and told her my opinion: society, in fact, has it out for all fat people, she scoffed at me. At the same time, I looked over at a fat, black young woman sitting in our circle. Her head was low and she was shaking it slowly in disagreement. Sometimes white people like to claim that Latinas and Black women somehow "have it easier" when it comes to size discrimination because of "different cultures" and "different beauty standards."

As Tricia Rose points out, in *The Hip Hop Wars,* we substitute the word "culture" for "behavior" when it comes to black folks' opinions, mentalities, and actions. (Rose 2008, 9) To write something off simply as "culture" prevents us from looking closely at these statements and analyzing behaviors. This type of thinking effectively ends the conversation about how black women and women of color experience fat bias. Many postcolonial feminists, for example Uma Narayan, have noted, when we write these aspects of society off so quickly as "culture," we also disregard the ways in which cultures are produced by individuals and institutions with power.

Sander Gilman explores the mythology and legacy of the Hottentot woman, or Hottentot Venus, as representative of black, deviant sexuality in *Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature.* A South African woman known as Saartjie Baartman, Sarah Baartmann, or Saat-Jee was exhibited to the English public in 1810 and came to represent the black female physical self and black female deviance during this time. (Gilman 1985, 140) Baartman was displayed, in London, as a "living curiosity" - like an animal in a zoo. "She wore beads and feathers hung around her waist, the accoutrements associated with her African ancestry and, on occasion, would play a small, stringed musical instrument." (Qureshi 2004, 236) These "ethnological exhibitions not only represented imperial activity but disturbingly blurred the human/animal boundary." (Qureshi 2004, 238) It seems, also, that one purpose of putting this woman on display was to emphasize the great difference between the black female body and the white female body, as this difference seemed to fascinate the white, European patrons who went to ogle at her.

All of Baartman's physical parts were examined with great scrutiny; particular attention was paid to her labia, her buttocks, and her genitalia in general. (Gilman 1985, 140-146) The exhibition and examination of Baartman came to influence not just public opinion and cultural impressions, but medical discourse as well. She was used to illustrate the supposedly "primitive" sexual nature of black, African women. (Gilman 1985, 142) Bartmann also came to represent the woman of color as animal – a stereotype that would also follow black, fat, and other deviant bodies. Bartmann is typically depicted in images with a strong emphasis on her buttocks, and this specific portrayal of her large bottom conjures images of female animals presenting their bottoms as a way to signal

they are ready for sex - further creating racist links between black women and animality and using Bartmann's body as a way to "prove" this white supremacist notion correct. The Bartmann archetype exists today; these so-called medical assessments influence the ways in which we now understand black, fat, female sexuality.

Gilman quotes an essay appearing in the *Dictionary of Medical Sciences* in 1819 by J.J. Virey, "According to him, [the black female's] 'voluptuousness' is 'developed to a degree of lascivity unknown in our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites.'" (Gilman 1985, 139) We see here the medical connection made between fat, or "voluptuousness", as it is called here, and sexual deviance. Additionally,

> "[e]lsewhere, Virey cites the Hottentot woman as the epitome of this sexual lasciviousness and stresses the relationship between her physiology and her physiognomy (her 'hideous form' and her 'horribly flattened nose')…In the nineteenth century, the black female was widely perceived as possessing not only a 'primitive' sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – 'primitive' genitalia. (Gilman 1985, 140)

One wonders how much of the description of the Hottentot's "hideous form" is referring to her fatness, her blackness, her African-ness, or combinations thereof. Her so-called primitive genitalia, however, may have been assessed as so because she was bigger than the average Victorian white woman and thus, her genitalia and buttocks were simply bigger. Gilman explains,

> In Theodore Billroth's standard handbook of gynecology, a detailed presentation of the 'Hottentot apron' is part of the discussion of errors in development of the female genitalia. By 1877 it was a commonplace that the Hottentot's anomalous sexual form was similar to other errors in the development of the labia. The author of this section links the malformation with the overdevelopment of the clitoris, which he sees as leading to those 'excesses' which 'are called lesbian love.' The concupiscence of the black is thus associated with the sexuality of the lesbian. (142)

We see here that an "overdeveloped," big, clitoris is equated with excess, sexual deviance, and lesbianism (which is always considered deviance in itself). Again, however, if the Hottentot was "voluptuous," as we gather from this literature, why do we expect her labia, her clitoris, or her vulva to then be tiny? Hopefully, we now understand medically and socially that vulvas and vaginas come in various sizes and shapes. This early medical research not only works to reinscribe the so-called inherent differences in black and white anatomies, it also works to mark fat as not just an excess of skin, but an excess of sexuality, a lack of sexual restraint, and an uncontrollable sexual appetite. We see institutional, medical racism being developed in the case of the Hottentot woman; we also see medical, scientific biases about fatness developed and documented.

It was not only the Hottentot's "apron", or vulva, that inspired such fear, objectification, and racism; her buttocks were also a topic of great contention. Women of color are often reduced to the size of their bottoms (Collins 2004, 129) and the Hottentot woman's buttocks were no exception. In fact, the exhibition of this woman may have been the beginning of the hyper-focus on black women's behinds, at least in terms of white, racist ideology that was being cultivated at the time. Gilman explains

> When the Victorians saw the female black, they saw her in terms of her buttocks and saw represented by the buttocks all the anomalies of her genitalia. In a mid-century erotic caricature of the Hottentot Venus, a white, male observer views her through a telescope, unable to see anything but her buttocks. This fascination with the uniqueness of the sexual parts of the black focuses on the buttocks over and over again. (144)

Again, the copiousness and excess of skin in certain areas is not just understood to be adipose tissue, it is assigned meaning. We do not see the body as simply existing, a combination of muscles, tendons, bones, nerves, and tissue; the body is used by those with power to subordinate some and give others social advantage. The body is used to

signify who is good and decent (white, thin, Victorian beauties, in this case) and who is deviant, monstrous, hyper-sexualized, to be feared, and in need of control.

The one cannot exist without the other, as Simone de Beauvoir illustrated in her work on the "Other." In order for the ideal to exist, there must then be that which is demonized, that which is considered undesirable, wrong, and deviant. De Beauvoir says, in *The Second Sex*, "Once the subject seeks to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless a necessity to him: he attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself." (139) Here de Beauvoir discusses the dynamic which has institutionalized and perpetuated the subordination of women, but the same concept is applicable to the social and clinical understanding of the black body and the white body as oppositional to one another. We also see this concept at work in respect to the fat body and the thin body. There always must be that which is "wrong" in order for it to be clear what is "right", one must accompany an "other."

Gilman quotes a pornographic novel published in 1899 set in "a mythic, antebellum, Southern United States," in which the author describes a runaway black slave woman, "She would have had a good figure, only that her bottom was out of all proportion. It was too big, but nevertheless it was fairly well shaped, with well-rounded cheeks meeting each other closely, her thighs were large, and she had a sturdy pair of legs, her skin was smooth and of a clear yellow tint." (144) For black Africans who were farmers or may have not had access to food production we are accustomed to, Bartmann's (and others') sturdy legs and voluptuous frame probably held significantly different meanings than it did for the white people who "studied" her. As I discuss further in the next chapter, time, place, and economics play a huge role in the ways we understand the

fat body and the meanings we associate with it. Being big in a time and place where food was scarce, or at least not abundant, would not have the same cultural meanings as in a society where food is more easy to come by.

The fascination and simultaneous degradation of fat on a woman of color's body continues to fascinate in popular culture and pornography today. We could consider rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot's song "Baby Got Back," in which he says, "My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns, hun. You can do side bends or sit-ups, But please don't lose that butt." Nicki Minaj created her own version of this song in 2014 and called it *Anaconda*. In it, she centers herself in the narrative arc of the song, and suggestively cuts up a banana in the music video, exhibiting her own subjectivity in a song originally about the male gaze, subverting the meaning of the song and positioning herself as a sexual actor rather than just an object. It can also be argued that Nicki, Beyoncé, and other black women who showcase their booties in public are "reclaiming" racist ideology of the past (as in the case of Bartmann) and using it to their advantage. Not only do these women make money as they reclaim the booty, but they are also subverting white beauty standards in the meantime. Beyoncé and Minaj are far from fat, but they do turn white, traditional beauty standards on their head as they celebrate parts of their bodies which were condemned by the men who locked up Bartmann all those years ago.

The Anaconda song lyrics illustrate the (more current) obsession with the black woman's bottom. She can and should be slim when it comes to the rest of her body, but not her bottom. The rapper Mos Def also describes his fascination with a woman we know as "Ms. Fat Booty" (also the title of the song); she is described as having an "ass so fat you could see it from the front." The singing trio Destiny's Child boasts about their

“Bootylicious” bottoms, though I would hardly say that any of the women in the group were fat. The black woman’s fat butt is an object to be consumed by white and black men alike (as well as society at large), and is still representative of her sexual availability, prowess, and of course, deviance from white, thin, “controlled", "normal” sexuality.

The song "Only" by Nicki Minaj and rappers Drake and Lil' Wayne features Drake's lyrics: "I like my girls BBW...type to wanna suck you dry and then eat some lunch with you." (from Minaj's 2014 album, *The Pinkprint*) BBW is a commonly used acronym to refer to fat women in porn, and stands for Big Beautiful Woman. It is typically deployed as a compliment, to be sure, but there is no clear definition or boundaries to elucidate who qualifies as a BBW. In this case, does it refer to Nicki herself, as Drake says in the same verse, "I never fucked Nicki cause she got a man, but when that's over then I'm first in line"? Or is he talking about other women?

Drake has been rumored to have had sexual relationships with Minaj, pop star Rihanna, Jennifer Lopez, and other famous women[25]. None of them are fat. Minaj does have some fat in her butt and boobs, but her stomach is very flat (see image below).

[25] see Asher, Jane. 2016. "A Timeline of Drake's Onscreen and IRL [in real-life]." *InStyle.* December 28, 2016. https://www.instyle.com/celebrity/drake-girlfriends-dated-timeline

Figure 3.21 Nicki Minaj

She says of her workout routine: "I don't work out. I hate it. I don't mean to sound super lazy. I tried it for a time. I lost my boobs. When I feel I need to lose weight, I just change what I eat. I cut out carbs and sugar. I'll do water and protein and fruit. But I do think that you should work out.[26]" Typically, BBW signifies a visibly fat woman with big legs, arms, and stomach. The women with whom Drake has been linked, including Minaj, are not fat. A Google search for the term "BBW" will bring up a plethora of images and videos of fat women, ranging from big women to very big women. Minaj is much thinner than the average woman who identifies, or is identified as, BBW. Granted, we live in a culture where a woman of average size is called fat; comedian Amy Schumer was recently labeled "plus-size" by Glamour magazine. She pushed back by saying she was a size 6 or 8 at most, and plus size is more like size 16.[27]

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[26] Watkins, Jade. 2013. *Daily Mail.* July 9, 2013. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2358851/Nicki-Minaj-reveals-hits-gym-effort-maintain-curves--squeezes-leather-dress.html

[27] France, Lisa Respers. 2016. *CNN.* "Amy Schumer to Glamour: I'm Not Plus-Size." April 6, 2016. http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/05/entertainment/amy-schumer-glamour-body-shaming-feat/

If we think of women like Minaj or Schumer as "BBW" or "plus size" - what effect might that have on women who are actually fat? Every time I heard Drake's lyric in "Only" about "liking his girls BBW," I wanted to break my radio. "No, no you don't!" I would yell, probably scaring my husband and other drivers who watched me yell into the void at stoplights. Never mind Drake's casual assertion that BBWs "wanna suck you dry and then eat some lunch with you," which links our sexuality, once again, to food and lack of control over our appetites, but if a woman like Minaj is considered BBW, where is there room in popular culture for women who are actually fat? We get pushed out of the picture. Which, if you agree with the Marie Claire columnist I quoted (who says she never wants to see fat people in public), may be precisely the aim.

There are distinct differences in the way women like Nicki Minaj are treated and the way someone like actress Gabourey Sidibe is treated. We could also think about Missy Elliot, before she lost weight, during the height of her popularity. Consider where these women hold their weight. Gabourey Sidibe, has fat in her midsection, along with her legs, arms, and chest. Missy, when she first became famous, also had fat in her abdominal area. She often wore baggy clothes, and did not showcase her body in the way many hip-hop and rap stars do. Perhaps because of the legacy of medical racism and the impact of the Hottentot woman (as an archetype) on our culture, black women with big butts and boobs are seen as normal. Or, given the legacy of these racist stereotypes, women like Minaj and others may be reclaiming and reappropriating these body standards for black women in ways they can control, and profit from.

CHAPTER 4. SEARCHING FOR FAT BEAUTY

As the history of art and fashion illustrates, fatness was not always considered unappealing. In this chapter, I explore some of the instances in which it was deemed beautiful, looking at examples such as Lillian Russell, famous American actress, the ancient icon Venus of Willendorf, considered by some to be a symbol of fertility, and others. I then explore the roles consumer culture and socioeconomic class play in the creation of these body ideals. I pursue questions regarding the "lesbian body" and the ways in which fatness and lesbianism are culturally linked. Finally, I examine how fat attraction and fat fetishization manifest in our culture, and examine the differences between the two.

As I searched and searched for examples of fat, socially sanctioned, attractive women, I often came up empty handed. Sure, there are women who are bigger than Kim Kardashian, perhaps of a different time, like Marilyn Monroe or Sophia Loren, who in their respective heydays symbolized the height of glamour and beauty. Their bodies are still glorious to look at in pictures; I would never contend otherwise. But they still do not look like me or my fat friends. Is there a woman of the past who *did* look more like me, and was revered for her jiggly and excessive body? Not just a little extra jiggle in her breasts or butt, but a woman with a large belly who is big all over? I crave an historical example like this. I want to see myself not as an abomination, but as something beautiful and strong, something desirable and important. It's not easy to find a body like mine not being used as a warning of what not to be.

While fat women beauties may not be very common in our current cultural moment, art history suggests this wasn't always the case. We could consider Hilda (see image below), who appeared on Brown and Bigelow calendars starting in 1898 (*Zaftig*

2000, 58); the iconic work of artists Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Pieter Paul Rubens (from which the term rubenesque originates) features big, fleshy women (see images below); Russian artist Boris Kustodiev and his paintings of "provincial merchants' wives" (see image below) (*Zaftig* 2000, 82) show large women who he saw as "spoiled, vain, overfed creatures," (*Zaftig* 2000, 82) but "he makes it clear that this was the kind of woman that was admired in provincial Russia" (*Zaftig* 2000, 82).

Figure 4.1 Hilda

Figure 4.2 Renoir painting

Figure 4.3 Rubens

Figure 4.4 Boris Kustodiev

There is another example, one that I am intrigued by, both by the image itself and by the conflicting perspectives on it that I've found. The Venus of Willendorf (see image below) looks a lot like me.

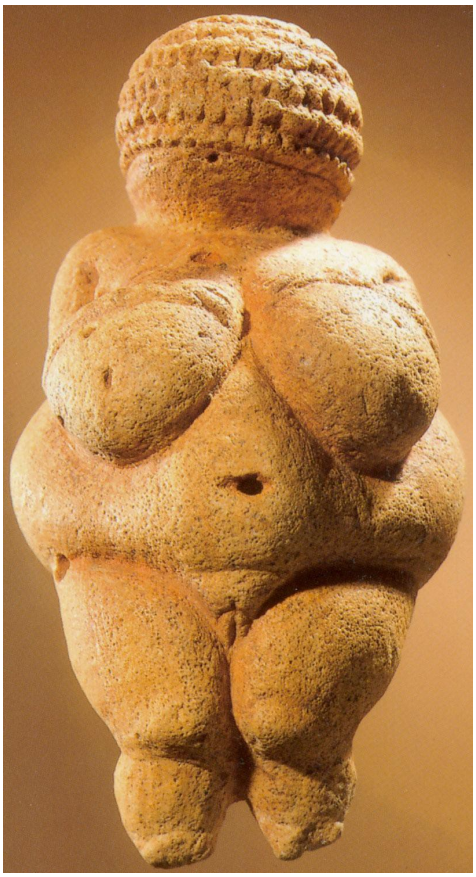

Figure 4.5 The Venus of Willendorf

Her sloping, large, protruding belly and hanging breasts are like mine. Abdominal fat is not considered sexy in the same ways as fat on the butt and breasts. Why, though? Medical experts say that abdominal fat can create specific health risks, but this seems to be a relatively recent finding[28]. Additionally, it seems as though abdominal fat is coded as masculine - beer bellies on dad bods are a relatively acceptable development for men as they become middle-aged. Women are clearly not permitted to get beer bellies or dad bods as they get older. Fat on the butt and breasts is, in turn, coded as feminine, and much

[28] see *Harvard Health Publishing*. 2005. "Abdominal Fat and What to Do About it." https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/abdominal-fat-and-what-to-do-about-it

more permissible for women of any age. The Venus' belly is what draws me to her, and is also a point of controversy among scholars and medical professionals who analyze her likeness.

I did a performance piece in 2017 where I visually compared my naked body with the Venus' at a Fat Studies conference. My body looks remarkably like hers, and I showed the similarities in my piece. I was thrilled to find her, after watching the pulpy HBO show *The Young Pope*, in which one of the Catholic bishops working with the Pope owns a statue of her and gazes at her longingly, day after day, scene after scene. I saw the replica on-screen and wondered, "Who is that beautiful lady?" and immediately purchased a book about her called *The Great Goddess: Reverence of the Divine Feminine from the Paleolithic to the Present* authored by Jean Markale. I was thrilled to dig in when the book arrived, but to my dismay, although the Venus is displayed on the cover, Markale only mentions her fleetingly.

When she does (briefly) mention the Venus, Markale implies that the she is "monstrous" (168) - dashing my hopes of finding some solace in ancient history. Further, scholars posit that the Venus was a symbol (Colman 1998, 58; Markale 51-2), some kind of imaginary woman who represented fertility, rather than modeled after an actual woman. In his article from *Endocrine Practice,* Eric Colman, MD, says, "...some have proposed that this figurine was the object of a cult: a fertility goddess used to conjure deities and obtain from them fertility for the species." (Colman 1998, 58) But this interpretation leaves me wanting more. Could the Venus represent beauty, instead? Does her fatness have to symbolize something functional, and why?

In his article "Fat Beauty," Richard Klein discusses the Venus and what she may or may not have been. He says, "Venuses, as we know, are goddesses of love, but archaeologists don't get it. With their professional bias in favor of use and usefulness, they assume these figures must be fertility fetishes, serving some ritual purposes - objects of prayer fashioned to foster conception and protect pregnancy." (Klein 1996, 21) I appreciate the term "fertility fetishes" he uses, simply because as I was reading Markale's text and some others regarding the Venus, it seemed as though the (modern) writers could not conceive that the sculpted woman could be anything other than a fetish, a symbol - indicating fertility. She cannot just exist on her own, in all her corpulent glory - she has to mean something, be something else, simply because we in our time cannot imagine worshipping or adoring someone with such a figure.

Klein continues, "They make that assumption based on the further assumption that since all of these figures are fat - fat breasts and bellies and thighs - they must be pregnant." (Klein 1996, 21-2) He discusses the usefulness of fat for our cave-dwelling ancestors and the ways in which fatness can be "insurance against the loss of her future child." (Klein 1996, 22) But pregnancy or potential pregnancy aside, he says, "What certainty do we have that these are ritual objects, magical amulets, or voodoo dolls? How do we know that their shapes and form are intended to cause they condition they seem to represent? Why do they have to be useful?" (Klein 1996, 22) Klein and I agree: the scientific assessment of the Venus is not a comprehensive one; a more interdisciplinary understanding is needed when we consider who and what the Venus was, and what she may have meant.

Finding a female goddess who looked like me and discovering most archeologists can only justify her corpulence by positing it as merely a symbol was disappointing. I appreciate the symbolic function of art, but I couldn't help thinking: Why isn't she allowed to just be? Why does she have to mean something to justify her existence? Is it not enough for her to simply exist? (And in my more petty emotional moments, why can't they just *leave us alone*?) We fat women have so few role models, so few women to look up to, can't these historians (archaeologists, scholars of ancient cultures, whoever you all are) just give us this one? But no, they have to call her a monster, a symbol, anything other than an example of a beautiful woman.

Perhaps, as Klein speculates, the problem is with the scientific worldview that we apply to ancient artifacts; he writes, "Scientists, who aren't supposed to take beauty into account, assume that cave people were not able to distinguish their love of what was beautiful from their desire to replenish the supply of human workers." (Klein 1996, 22) He offers an alternative: "But when you look at these amazing figures, in three dimensions, in the very round, you see a lot of things sticking out on every side. Asses are no less the focus of artistic attention than breasts or vast, prominent bellies, and that's important...A fat ass doesn't serve any reproductive function. Except that it's fat, and in general fat is fertile." (Klein 1996, 22) So if the Venus of Willendorf is *only* a symbol of fertility, why include her fat ass? Klein says, "A big, beautiful ass on these figures is an object of admiration and a spur to dreaming, a sort of pillow on which our grottoed ancestors may well have fantasized fat, and in times of scarcity dreamt of its pleasures. In the dreams of the caveman, these goddesses gambol at play in fat fields and splash in lively streams, lovely ladies abounding in the lush landscapes that compose his vision of

paradise." (Klein 1996, 22) And why not? Our tendency to impose our own cultural and time-specific values on everything, including the Venus, makes it impossible to imagine that the Venus might have been anything other than a symbol of fertility. I want to imagine the Venus as someone who was, and could be, a representation of beauty. I want her to be my foremother, flourishing in a time when my body was not considered monstrous. I want to look to her for help and guidance when I feel like everyone, everywhere hates me for the way I look. But instead, I get scholarly and medical interpretations which make this impossible. I want the Venus to be free of these (relatively new) cultural constraints. I want to be free with her.

4.1 Lillian Russell: Beautiful Excess

Actress Lillian Russell, a more recent fat beauty, according to Cookie Woolner, in "American Excess: Cultural Representations of Lillian Russell in Turn-of-the-Century America" was "one of the most famous American actresses at the turn-of-the-twentieth century." (Woolner 2010, 130) Russell's weight was an inextricable from her fame, and she was "rumored to have weighed up to 200 pounds, but was more likely to have been between 165 and 180 at the height of her career, 'The American Beauty,' as Russell was known, was *the* symbol of American decadence in the 1890s…" (Woolner 2010, 130) Woolner explicitly links Russell with excesses of the time, connecting her emergence into public life, and the fame that followed, with the explosion of wealth for the captains of industry in the United States. (Woolner 2010, 130)

However, in this instance, contrary to how we might understand Russell's big body today, Woolner says, "Despite such excesses, or perhaps because of them, she was

widely reputed to be the most beautiful, desirable woman in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century." (Woolner 2010, 131) Russell was most certainly excessive, there was little question of that. Not only was Russell's actual body excessive, but she also lived extravagantly. Woolner explains,

> Everything surrounding Lillian, from her body to the stories about her body, was excessive. A fan of exercise since her youth, she took up the bicycle when it came into vogue in the late 1890s. She performed her vigor for all to see on an appropriately ostentatious bicycle; thus she could often be seen riding around Central Park on a gold and jewel encrusted model...and Russell was famously described as eating as much as any man. (Woolner 2010, 133)

Woolner positions Russell's undeniable appeal in terms American prosperity, or at least in terms of the American dream of wealth and luxury. Woolner says, "Lillian Russell's large size coupled with her excessive femininity[29] (see image below of Russell) led her to become a symbol of American prosperity, and in addition made it acceptable for her to take part in activities usually defined as masculine." (Woolner 2010, 131)

[29] In her article, Woolner uses images of Russell to illustrate her "hyper-feminine" presentation; I have included these images here (see above for image), and in these images it is clear that Russell's dress, hair, jewelry, and other accoutrement all contributed to her very feminine appearance.

Figure 6.1 Lillian Russell. Digital Image Collection of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 4.6 Lillian Russell

These narratives about excess, prosperity, attraction, and the female body may seem foreign to us now. But this symbolism conveyed by Russell's body - symbolizing American excess, as Woolner explains - is precisely what garnered her positive attention.

Woolner explains that the abundant body was a welcome departure from the scarcity rampant during the Civil War. She cites Lois Banner's *American Beauty* in which Banner explains that the "voluptuous woman" was "an icon of national beauty in the mid-to-late nineteenth century." (Woolner 2010, 131) "Banner argues that these years were especially auspicious for the excessive or fat female body. Their fleshy bodies were popular in the late nineteenth century…because they fed a hedonism that came into vogue after the traumatic, lean years of the Civil War.[30]" (Woolner 2010, 131) After wartime, when food and luxury were scarce, the fat body was seen as a departure from this scarcity. The excesses of the fat female figure were celebrated instead of denigrated in the case of Russell, as well as in the case of the "British Blondes," performers in

[30] This difference between American and British economic reality could explain Russell's appeal during this time in which the slender Victorian ideal woman was in vogue.

English burlesque troupes in the 1860s and 1870s. (Woolner 2010, 131) Woolner says, "Just as physicians began to associate plumpness with good health, so too the newly wealthy in this era of industrialization associated their size, including their fat, with their prosperity." (Woolner 2010, 131) Does it not follow logically that a country so obsessed with wealth and prosperity would want (what they considered) signs of affluence to be exhibited on the body? In the case of Lillian Russell, this is precisely what happened. There was an important moment in which Russell embodied uniquely American beauty, Woolner explains, before the (more recent) ideological rise of "fat is evil" became common sense. Her bodily abundance mirrored the cultural abundance around her, and this excess was seen as positive - something to be celebrated. Economics, thus, were central to Russell's celebrity.

The ways we consider fat today did not seem to apply to Russell during her height of fame. Her famous large body is an example of the ways in which body ideals change and morph, based on the cultural climate of the time. "Modern negative stereotypes, which associate fatness with ugliness and undesirability, do not apply to Lillian, who oozed feminine sexuality and had male suitors and flower arrangements awaiting her after each performance." (Woolner 2010, 138) Lillian was generally considered to be beautiful, attractive, and talented during this time; this is truly difficult for us in our time to imagine! Woolner explains, "Relatedly, she was not viewed as lazy, unclean, or uncouth – eating contests aside. Her desirability was never questioned." (Woolner 2010,

138) Even when Lillian was challenging men to eating contests, her femininity and desirability remained intact.[31]

Woolner explains that Lillian's appetites for sex and food did exist, very publicly, as stereotypes dictate, but Russell was not sanctioned for her hunger. She had many husbands, according to Woolner, and was very popular among men. Woolner claims that people envied and admired the excesses and prosperity that Russell represented and embodied. She was not punished for her consumption or for indulging her appetites. Ultimately though, Woolner says, the times changed and Russell was tamed. She began "the banting process" (140), a weight loss regimen, and became a beauty columnist during the rise of the sexualized flapper girl. (142) Her large body fell out of style, but it is important to remember: there was a brief moment in which she represented the cultural physical ideal (inextricably tied to the economic reality of the time), and was loved and admired as a large, sexually attractive woman. Economics, as I will explore in the next section, will continue to influence the ways we understand fatness.

4.2 Economics, Race, Ethnicity, and Race

An important divergence from the hypersexual/asexual dichotomy which I established in the previous chapter relates to economic class. For women who are subjugated by economic class and race/ethnicity, a bigger body could arguably mean the

[31] Woolner notes that Russell's mother, a feminist, brought her from Iowa to New York. She says this, of Russell's socioeconomic status: "Indeed, Lillian's excess could have been problematic if she had been marked as working-class or ethnic. Her middle-class roots in all-American Iowa, success in New York, which brought her financial prosperity, and Anglo looks all defied the common stereotype of the voluptuous woman as coming from working-class and/ or "ethnic" roots. Because of this, there was less of a stigma attached to her size and appetite, which could be viewed as symbols of success in an era when many wealthy men had large bellies and jewels encrusting their lapels, watches, and canes." (Woolner 2010, 137)

difference between survival and death. Bigger bodies could help one be more sturdy in work that requires manual labor, and stored fat could potentially help a person survive when food is scarce. I can see this distinction in the different ways my two grandmothers viewed their bodies. My father's mother, whose parents were both Polish immigrants, was hearty and sturdy - certainly not thin when I knew her. Her body did not seem to be much of a problem for my family. She was a working-class woman, never having the opportunity to get a college degree. She and my grandfather owned a restaurant together, and did the cooking themselves.

When I knew her, many years later, she was always cooking some delicious Polish dish for us; her kitchen always smelled of borscht, perogies, or kielbasa. In contrast, my mother's mother and father had achieved middle-class status, or even upper middle-class status, by the time my mom came around. My grandmother on this side of the family, further removed from her immigrant status and more upwardly mobile than my Polish side of the family, was completely obsessed with her weight and talked about it incessantly. It appeared to me, even at a young age, to be a constant source of stress and anxiety for her, and she was not reserved in discussing her body anxiety. Interestingly, she was much thinner and much more petite than my Polish-American grandma. The primary difference between the two, as I see it, was their respective positions in terms of economic class. They were both heterosexual white women, but, it seems, experienced their bodies in extraordinarily different ways. Susan Bordo explains this phenomenon, and says,

> Until the late nineteenth century, the central discriminations marked were those of class, race, and gender; the body indicated social identity and 'place.' So, for example, the bulging stomachs of successful mid-nineteenth century businessmen

> and politicians were a symbol of bourgeois success, an outward manifestation of their accumulated wealth. (Bordo 1993, 191)

So we can see that the hearty, stocky, sometimes fat body symbolized something very different than it does today. It was a way for middle-class men to show off their relative financial success. Bordo continues:

> By contrast, the gracefully slender body announced aristocratic status; disdainful of the bourgeois need to display wealth and power ostentatiously, it commanded social space invisibly rather than aggressively, seemingly above the commerce in appetite or the need to eat. Subsequently, this ideal began to be appropriated by the status-seeking middle class, as slender wives became the showpieces of their husbands' success. (Bordo 1993, 191-2)

I can see this dynamic at work in respect to my two grandmothers. My maternal grandmother, the one who had achieved middle class or upper middle-class status, was significantly more concerned with her weight. Both of these women are dead now, so sadly I cannot ask them about their feelings regarding their bodies. But it would appear that my maternal grandmother's preoccupation with her body was at least, in part, due to her class status. She wanted to be that slender prize on my grandfather's arm when they went to cocktail parties. While I watched the brilliant television series *Mad Men*, the Betty Draper character reminded me of my grandmother - so much so that it was often difficult for me to watch. Later in the series, when Betty gains weight due to a thyroid problem, we can see that her identity and reality are compromised because of this weight gain. She is expected to be a beautiful showpiece, as Bordo says, and a fat woman cannot be a beautiful showpiece.

In contrast, my paternal grandmother was more connected with her family's immigrant status, much more immersed in the subculture of Polish-American life than any community my maternal grandmother may have had. She was a worker, not a

decoration. Therefore, her bigger, sturdier, stockier body seemed to be much more acceptable in her social circles than it would have been for my maternal grandmother. Importantly, with more financial capital comes the ability to choose to diet. My dad's mother likely did not have the time or the luxury to think about dieting; she was always working. She was also invested in her subcultural ethnic identity - eating and preparing Polish food, to my family, was an imperative as they tried to preserve their ethnic heritage.

Bordo says: "The moral requirement to diet depends on the material preconditions that make the *choice* to diet an option and the possibility of personal 'excess' a reality." (Bordo 1993, 193) My mom's mother had more time on her hands (she was a housewife) and more money at her disposal. Thus, she had more time to be obsessed with her body, and more time and money to worry about ways to become thinner. I remember a time, when I was a young girl, and my maternal grandmother was musing about my father's side of the family - the decidedly less refined side, the immigrant side, the poor side - and she said, with condescension heavy in her voice: "Your grandma is such a lovely woman. So salt-of-the-earth, isn't she?" Salt-of-the-earth is something she never cared to be, and that was abundantly clear. Sadly, I think the very thing that made her feel superior to my dad's side of the family was the very thing that made her hate her body so intensely.

Race factors into this equation, as well. In a *New York Times* Op-Ed by Alice Randall, called "Black Women and Fat," Randall talks about the need for a "body-culture revolution in black America. Why? Because too many experts who are involved in the discussion of obesity don't understand something crucial about black women and fat: many black women are fat because we want to be." (Randall 2012) She continues, "How

many middle-aged white women fear their husbands will find them less attractive if their weight drops to less than 200 pounds? I have yet to meet one." (Randall 2012) Although certain types of fatness seem to be universally condemned on women (the abdominal fat I discussed earlier), fat on the breasts and butt, for black women and non-black women of color, has often been considered a point of pride. Randall says, "But I know many black women whose sane, handsome, successful husbands worry when their women start losing weight. My lawyer husband is one." (Randall 2012) Randall posits that this fat-preference among black men might be harmful to their black women lovers and wives because of the claims that obesity causes diabetes and other health risks, which are prominent among African-Americans.

It's not just her husband who likes his women a little plumper. She explains, "Another friend, a woman of color who is a tenured professor, told me that her husband, also a tenured professor and of color, begged her not to lose 'the sugar down below' when she embarked on a weight-loss program." (Randall 2012) Randall claims that the preference for bigger bodies among black people in the United States is harmful. She calls on her fellow black women and men to work together to lose weight and change beauty standards and preferences. She does not address the many factors which may make it difficult for black people, and people in general, to lose weight; she assumes it can happen for everyone with the right amount of effort.

But like my working-class grandmother, sometimes women (and men) are working so much and so hard that they do not have the time, energy, our resources to diet and exercise. Certainly this is applicable to many African-Americans, as there is a documented pay gap between white men and women and African-American men and

women (Pew 2016). If we understand that racism functions in ways which make it difficult for black people to access financial capital in the same ways as white people, we can also make the jump to understanding that their socioeconomic class might make it harder for them to lose weight. Randall seems invested in her middle-class status, as noted by the types of professions she lists (of her husband and friends). Her ability to call for this "body-culture revolution" appears to be rooted in class mobility. We could understand the difference in body preferences among some African-American people as class-specific rather than race-specific, as affinity for fatness is often assumed to be racially-motivated rather than a product of class status.

However, Randall's perspective is not universally shared. Her op-ed inspired online responses from black women, especially, who considered the issue to be more of a structural one than personal. In a response to Randall on the *Huffington Post,* Dr Maya Rockeymoore explains that she posted Randall's article on her personal social media accounts, looking for debate about Randall's assessments about black women and fat. She says,

> The few responses I received highlighted several themes: 1) cultural attitudes against skinny women are present in black popular culture and at home but are not universally shared; 2) psychosocial factors, such as when black women use food as a crutch for depression and loneliness, play a role; 3) environmental factors have a lot to do with it; and, 4) having a cultural preference for curvier bodies does not translate into wanting to be fat. (Rockeymoore 2012)

She goes on to explain that Randall does not do an especially good job of thinking about how poverty influences eating choices and ability to exercise - a common criticism of those who contend that anyone can be thin with enough effort. In her article, Rockeymoore brings up location - particularly neighborhood safety - as a potential barrier

to exercise, especially if people are unable to afford a gym membership. Writer Duchess Harris, also in an article on the *Huffington Post*, chimes in and responds by saying,

> Our children aren't fat, but we spend $15,000 a year on each of them so that they aren't. If they were fat, it wouldn't be because we'd want them to be. It'd be because the government has led us to diabetes as a pit stop before the prison industrial complex. They are killing us softly, and health should be the embodiment of disobedience. That is truly an unruly Black politic. (Harris 2012)

Harris makes the connection here between the ill health of black people and mass incarceration, both used as a tool to eliminate black people. She also invokes Andrea Elizabeth Shaw's *The Embodiment of Disobedience*, an essential text that takes a critical lens to the ways fatness and blackness intersect. Shaw says, "Despite the West's privileging of slenderness...the African Diaspora has historically displayed a resistance to the Western European and North American indulgence in 'fat anxiety.'" (Shaw 2006, 1) In her unique scholarship, Shaw asserts that fat black women's bodies are a site of resistance to white supremacy, colonialism, and other forces which render the fat, black woman's body both invisible and hypervisible. She says,

> The West has required the ideological erasure of both blackness and fatness as a means of gaining aesthetic acceptability...and...[representations of black women's bodies] suggest that her body primarily functions as a site of resistance to both gendered and racialized oppression because that body has been the historic locus for assaults against black womanhood. (Shaw 2006, 2)

Shaw's work highlights the ways in which the fat, black woman's body was and is positioned as antithetical to the white, western, feminine ideal as a way of racializing and marginalizing those who do not conform to this ideal. To her, the forces of colonialism and imperialism are written on fat, black women's bodies. For fat black women, thus, to simply exist and live is a form of resistance. It is also worth noting that the health concerns expressed by Randall and others could be easily attributed to stressors

associated with racism. High blood pressure, heart attack, stroke - all of these can be attributed to living under high-stress situations, which being a black person living with white supremacy most certainly is.

4.3 Lesbians: Making Fat Beautiful?

It is not uncommon, when considering the lesbian body, to connect lesbian sexuality with a certain body type. A notable example of this is the connection made between lesbianism and "mannishness." French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir took on the (still commonly observed) dominant ideology that lesbians were "mannish" in 1953 when *The Second Sex* was published, her magnum opus on the biological and social meanings of what we call woman. She says, in her section on "The Lesbian,"

> We commonly think of the lesbian as a woman wearing a plain felt hat, short hair, and a necktie; her mannish appearance would seem to indicate some abnormality of the hormones. Nothing could be more erroneous than this confounding of the invert [Sigmund Freud's term for homosexual[32]] with the 'viriloid[33]' woman. (de Beauvoir 1953, 404)

She also challenges the idea that feminine women are less likely to have sexual attraction to women. She continues to say, "There are many homosexuals among harem inmates, prostitutes, among most intentionally 'feminine' women; and conversely, a great many 'masculine' women are heterosexual." (de Beauvoir 1953, 404) This separation of the

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[32] see Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

[33] having a masculine presentation, high sex drive

physical self and the sexual self will continue to confound theorists, scholars, and the general public. De Beauvoir, again, says: “Sexologists and psychiatrists confirm the common observation that the majority of female ‘homos’ are in constitution quite like other women. Their sexuality is in no way determined by any anatomical ‘fate.’” (de Beauvoir 1953, 404) While we do not usually use the term “homos” anymore, de Beauvoir is presenting an immensely controversial theory here. The body, how it is presented, and its features, and all of its inner-workings, do not necessarily indicate a person’s sexuality.

Memoirs and scholarship like Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* by Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis give us other perspectives on sexuality and gender presentation, complete with repression and bar raids targeting LGBT people, arrests, and persecution at the hands of local police and federal law. Importantly, both *Stone Butch Blues* and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* address, via interview and fictionalized memoir respectively, discuss the butch/femme subculture that was integral to working-class lesbianism during this time. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold,* Kennedy and Davis explain,

> Before the 1970s, [butch-fem roles were] unmistakable in all working-class lesbian communities: the butch projected the masculine image of her particular time period - at least regarding dress and mannerisms - and the fem, the feminine image; and almost all members were exclusively one or the other." (Kennedy and Davis 2014, 5)

Butch lesbian identity may have become what many people picture when they think about lesbians and what they look like. Ideas about lesbian presentation has changed over time, but they rarely seem to encompass the wide variety of women who love women. Perhaps because many people unconnected to lesbian or queer subculture have selective

ideas about the ways lesbians look, the idea of the "mannish" - butch or masculine - lesbian clings on. This is especially true for those who think there should be a "man" and a "woman" in every relationship, even lesbian ones.

It is also assumed, in conjunction with lesbians being "mannish," that they are also bigger in size than heterosexual women. Laura Brown posited, in her 1987 piece "Lesbians, Weight, and Eating," that lesbian women in feminist communities could shield themselves from mainstream culture, and were less likely to be concerned with the beauty norms which demand women be thin and small. She says, "Because of the inroads made in some sectors of the lesbian separatist and lesbian feminist communities by lesbian fat activists, the level of awareness regarding fat oppression tends to be somewhat higher in those settings." (Brown 1987, 307) Lesbians who eschew other cultural norms, and who may have more awareness of the ways in which beauty standards can constrict and control women, may also loosen their expectations and be more accepting of women's diverse body sizes. Brown continues, "Thus the problems usually faced by a fat woman because of the fat-oppressive attitudes and behaviors of her significant others may be less likely to be present for some fat lesbians." (Brown 1987, 307) Similarly, in a 2014 article posted on the gay blogging website *Autostraddle*, writer Mari Brighe echoes Brown's theories and says,

> [P]erhaps, that queer girl culture doesn't suffer the incessant, unreasonable pressure of the male gaze in the same way that straight girl culture does. After all, if you don't have to concern yourself with attracting men as romantic partners, it's considerable (sic) more reasonable to not give a fuck about their photoshopped-magazine-and-mainstream-pornography fueled beauty standards, and you might be less likely to internalize that garbage.

So we have Brown, working as a counselor in 1987, noticing that lesbians might have different ideas and expectations when it comes to women's bodies and then Brighe

affirms this notion in 2014, and the title of her *Autostraddle* article proudly proclaims, "Lesbian Obesity Study Misses the Point: We Don't Care if We're Fat." No mincing words there. To complicate this narrative a little, a 2006 study in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* found that "regardless of lesbian or feminist identity, BMI was an important predictor of physical attractiveness." (Swami and Tovée 2006, 255) However, the same study reports that "lesbians prefer heavier line-drawn figures than heterosexual women." (Swami and Tovée 2006, 255) The authors postulate that this may be because lesbians are bigger themselves, "and so have chosen figures that more closely resembled their own body types." (Swami and Tovée 2006, 256) But they cite data which makes the claim that lesbians are, in fact, bigger than heterosexual women, and this research is from the early 1990s.

Esther Rothblum says, "The majority of studies comparing lesbians with heterosexual women in the United States find that lesbians weigh more, although this is not always the case, even in population-based studies." (Rothblum 2014, 377) Not terribly definitive, and changing cultural standards regarding weight make it difficult to be definitive. My hope, in exploring this topic, is that we begin to separate the presentation of the physical body from the reality of sexual impulses, urges, and drives. Additionally, solidarity-building between lesbians, queer women, and straight women can be built on the rejection of the cultural distaste for women's bodies in *all* forms and is one way to move forward. Rothblum suggests that lesbians take the lead in ushering a new era in which we take it easier on ourselves and other women, and says,

> Given the multibillion dollar appearance industries, could lesbians be used as role models of body acceptance? Women would be well-served to be rid of the oppression of appearance standards, including weight. Lesbians have often been

> at the forefront of social activism. Consequently, lesbians should take the lead in removing the stigma about body weight. (Rothblum 2014, 381)

This is an inspiring recommendation and vision for a future of women's solidarity and support for one another.

When I teach my students about feminism, sex, gender, and sexuality, I am often the first person to address sexuality honestly with them. It's a big responsibility, and I find myself weighed down by the task. I also struggle when they make honest mistakes, and say the "wrong" thing. For example, when I ask them what they think about feminism, they often reply with: "all feminists are fat and gay" or "feminists are fat and ugly and don't shave their armpit hair" or something of this nature.

I am especially interested in the association they make with lesbianism, fatness, and ugliness. This is not a new idea or a radical one, as Rush Limbaugh's infamous "feminazi" archetype is an amalgamation of all three. But observation can prove these associations wrong. For example, a lesbian friend of mine, who lives in a red state, in a conservative area in the US, presents as very feminine. She wears lots of makeup, high heels, dresses, and has a great fashion sense. People often look at her in amazement when she walks by. Little girls are fascinated with her. I'm not sure if they've ever seen anyone like her. She spends hours and hours on a carefully put-together feminine presentation. She is also a lesbian.

My friend is exclusively attracted to other feminine women. Which comes as a surprise to people, given her high-femme expression. Perhaps in San Francisco or New York City, people would not be so surprised that she does not have any interest in men. But in the red states, it is confusing to people. Because she spends so much time on her appearance, and is not interested in partnering with someone masculine, she tends to

confuse people who think that every relationship should have in it someone masculine and someone feminine. Men hit on her aggressively, and women are threatened or confused by her. She has a tough time finding community (and long-term love), because she does not "look like a lesbian." The way she dresses, as well as her very small, thin body, all signal "straight" to the women and men around her, as many of them have internalized messages about "ugly fat lesbians" or at the very least, and that our body size and fashion choices are integrally linked to our sexual expression.

When I was in middle school, I did not have very many friends. I was a nerdy kid, preferring books and animals to people, and usually had a few close girlfriends with whom I spent my time. This was okay with me. More than once (in fact, constantly), I was accused of being a lesbian. I was taunted, teased, pushed and shoved – all because my peers thought I was gay. The amount of times I was spat at, called a "fat dyke" in the halls of my middle school is unquantifiable.

In fact, it would be years before I would have sex with another person, as I was still in the throes of a Catholic adolescence which would leave me with inner turmoil and emotional scars for years to come. I was doing the right thing, back then, according to Catholic doctrine – I was saving myself for marriage. To a man. But I loved my girlfriends dearly, and they got me through those tough years. We went to movies together, to the mall: typical teenaged girl stuff. But it never failed, if it was just me and one other girl, we were presumed to be lesbians. I am not even sure if I knew what lesbian was back then. I just knew the Church told me they were bad.

I was chubby, if not fat, at this time, and so were many of my awkward friends. Why was I "read", or rather accused, of being a lesbian when I was not, and my high-

femme friend has such a difficult time signaling her lesbianism those around her? Was my experience just a matter of cruel adolescent behavior, or does it indicate something about the ways we make assumptions about sexuality, based on presentation? I did not, and still do not, care too much about hair and makeup, preferring what I call my "disheveled chic" look to anything that requires much work. I am also fat. My high-femme friend spends hours making herself up, and is about a hundred pounds soaking wet. I wonder if this is a coincidence. I tell these two stories back-to-back because I think they illustrate the cultural notions I am trying to examine here. One of those notions is the idea that lesbians weigh more than straight women and have special leeway when it comes to beauty standards, like Laura Brown posited in her 1987 study.

Fat queer and lesbian women do seem to emerge as voices of resistance to oppressive body norms, especially sub-culturally. There seems to be more social space for these women to emerge as plus-sized icons, especially when their music subculture is linked with feminist or LGBTQ activism. For example, lesbian and queer culture provides us with counter-cultural icons like Beth Ditto, singer and fat activist. Ditto was the lead singer for The Gossip, a band which came to (some) prominence in the wake of the riot grrl movement[34]. Ditto is a plus-sized icon, and even runs her own high-fashion clothing line which features a range of large sizes[35]. Full disclosure: I was living in Olympia, Washington during the rise of Ditto's band in the early 2000s, when they were gaining popularity. My band even opened for The Gossip when they were touring the

[34] see film *Don't Need You* for more on riot grrl and it's cultural effects

[35] see https://shop.bethditto.com

album *Standing in the Way of Control*, right before they became famous in England and parts of the US.

Beth is a force to be reckoned with; watching her perform in small clubs and bars was, in many ways, a transcendent experience for me. Her voice is incredible; she invokes soul singers of the past. She is also entrancing to watch. She takes off her clothes on-stage, often performing in her bra and underwear, and is unapologetic about her fat body. She was featured in the British music magazine NME in 2007, showing off her fat rolls and all, with a big set of red lips on her butt cheek, accompanied by the text "Kiss My Ass," (see image below of Ditto) a clear message about her performance style and her attitude regarding her body and fat-phobia.

Figure 4.7 Beth Ditto in NME

Not only was I lucky enough to watch The Gossip gain this notoriety, but I also spent some time with Beth when I lived in the Pacific Northwest. She is a brilliant fat advocate

and person, and was the first person to make me aware of activist Nomy Lamm's fat activist writing and her zines[36].

Both Lamm's and Ditto's activisms are situated in a subcultural context, speaking to and with fat, queer, and lesbian punk musicians and activists who found their voices through the third wave riot-grrl movement which included bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Huggy Bear, and their members, activists Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, Allison Wolfe, and others. These bands came from the progressive radical subculture in the Pacific Northwest, which includes feminist, anti-racist, gay/queer, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist activists. This subculture also nurtured bands like Nirvana and Hole before their rise to fame. The Gossip emerged from this sub-cultural milieu, and in addition to having feminist politics, Beth Ditto became an important fat-positive activist, as body size was not often addressed by other riot grrl musicians. Nomy Lamm, and later Ditto, would put their fat bodies front and center, introducing another layer to the intersectional approach of many third-wave feminist thinkers and activists.

Ditto and Lamm are excellent examples of the ways lesbian/queer feminist grrl (or girl) culture can subvert mainstream body expectations. They both challenge the thin-oriented ways feminists often talk about issues of the body. Lamm says,

> My thin friends are constantly being validated by mainstream feminism, while I am ignored. The most widespread mentality regarding body image at this point is something along these lines: Women look in the mirror and think 'I'm fat,' but really they're not. Really they're thin...But really I'm fat. According to mainstream feminist theory, I don't even exist...There are women who *are* fat, and that needs to be dealt with. (Lamm 1995)

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[36] see Lamm's piece "It's a Big Fat Revolution" and *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* by Alison Piepmeier

Lamm encourages a nuanced examination of what it means to have a fat body within mainstream feminism. Much of the inspiration for this project comes from Lamm's and Ditto's work, performances, and activism. The thin feminists I knew (and know), no matter how sympathetic they are, do not understand what it is like to live in a fat, feminine body. And when we collapse critiques of body norms and body image into one big category, and talk about women's bodies as if they are all treated the same, we erase the particular reality of being fat.

Ditto and Lamm refused to accept this, and they make their bodies the locus of their activism and art. Because of women like them, I was able to find my own voice in a culture that often ignores me, at best, or degrades me, at worst. The fact that both Lamm and Ditto identify as queer/lesbian is no coincidence. The radical queer/lesbian feminist subculture gave them a space where they could vocally and publicly resist body norms.

Ditto is also part of a tradition that can "allow" women to be bigger and especially visible in a unique way - in bands and other types of musical acts. For another example, Brittany Howard of the band Alabama Shakes is a prominent fat black woman musician who has found success as the lead singer and guitar player in her band. Bigger black women like blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith paved the way for Howard and others - perhaps even Ditto, as she often sings in the style (Southern blues) and tradition of these trailblazing blues women.

Notably, Rainey and Smith, as well as Ditto, have all openly had sexual relationships with women (see Davis 1999, 45 - regarding Rainey and Smith). They all subvert traditional, white womanhood in terms of their fatness, blackness (in the case of Rainey, Smith, and Howard), and in their sexual relationships. Angela Davis writes about

Rainey and Smith and says, "I want to suggest that women's blues provided a cultural space for community-building among working-class black women, and that it was a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and "true womanhood" were absent." (Davis 1999, 45) It is important to note, too, that Rainey, Smith, and Ditto all gained notoriety in musical subcultures, outside of mainstream popular music, to some extent - Ditto in the feminist punk scene, and Rainey and Smith in the segregated south during the Jim Crow era (Davis 1999). These subcultures, although precarious, provide space for fat, lesbian and/or bisexual, women of color to express themselves openly and for their bodies to take center stage.

Elle King (see image below), a pop/country singer, also seems to capitalize on the leeway music can provide for fat women.

Figure 4.8 Elle King

She sings and presents in ways similar to Ditto - high femme, tattooed, a sort of femme fatale type. In her hit song "Ex's and Oh's," she sings about loving men and leaving them, assumedly while on tour - flipping the typical script men rock-and-rollers have been singing about for years. In the video, there are scantily-clad men vying for her attention, which she does not give them. It fits with my archetype of the hypersexual, down-for-anything fat girl stereotype, but not everyone is buying it. One Youtube user says of the video, "Who wants her? Whale watching, Don't go in the ocean._" Another Youtube user says, "She should be holding on to any guy she can't get lol_." Another user chimes in, "What man would 'run back' to this fat tub of lard? lol. Maybe she should try doing some running to lose that michelin man look. BRRRAAAAPPPPP!!!!_" Some of the Youtube commenters defend King's look and body, but mostly compliment her singing voice rather than her appearance. She has found some mainstream success, though, more than Ditto or the black blues women did.

We could also consider singer Adele to also be a part of this tradition, although her presentation of lonely, sad, respectable white womanhood is considerably different from Ditto, Rainey, or Smith's more confident and self-assured performances of fat femininity and womanhood. Adele's physical presentation is noticeably controlled, even though her music is often emotionally cathartic and forcefully sung. She is likely able to gain fame and notoriety because she presents as feminine and respectable - especially in terms of how she dresses. She is often photographed from the waist up (see images below from a Google image search of Adele), and her body is typically shrouded in earthy-toned clothing.

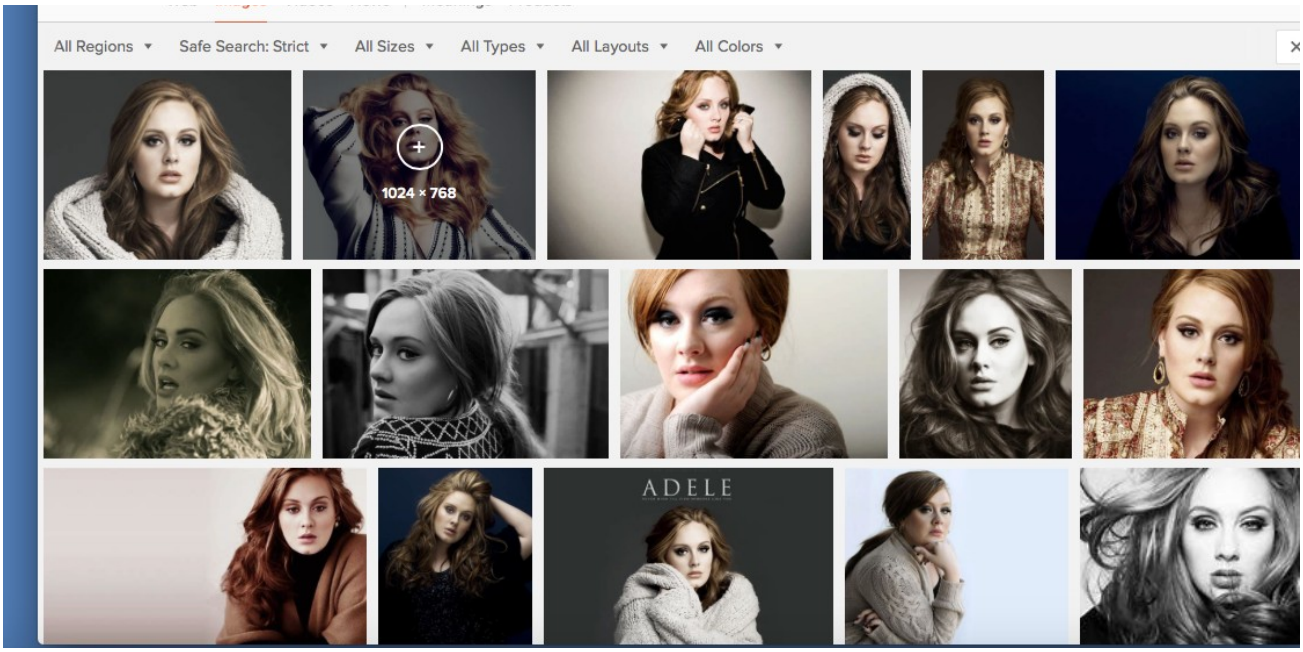

Figure 4.9 Adele

Unlike Ditto, especially, but also Rainey and Smith - who were quite showy for their times - it is likely that Adele is able to achieve mainstream success because of her reluctance to "show off" her body. I imagine that she would not be as celebrated if she acted like Ditto or other, more flamboyant singers. It is also important to mention that Adele is straight, or presents as heterosexual, and sings about lost loves and emotional devastation. In this way, she plays the part of the sad, lonely fat girl archetype I developed in the previous chapter.

4.4 Is Consumer Culture “Getting It”?: Capitalism and Changing Body Ideals

An important component in the proliferation of the "perfect body" ideal is the role of consumer culture. Helga Dittmar traces the meaning and function of consumer culture when she says,

> Consumer culture is best seen as 'the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption (as defined by Arnould and Thompson 2005), now characterized in mass consumer societies by an obsession with 'to have to be' (from Fromm 1978 and Kasser and Kanner 2004), and cult of perfect beauty, however exacting (from Thompson, et al, 1999 and Pope, et al, 2000)

The so-called "perfect body" is, of course, a cultural product, tied to various industries and cultural ideologies. Advertisements for products and processes that will help one achieve the "perfect body" are countless; all you need to do is flip through a magazine or your television channels to see examples. Television programs also teach us about how we should look, dress, and behave. Reality television is particularly relevant in this case. When watching *Keeping Up with The Kardashians,* for example, the Kardashian/Jenner clan is not just presenting a television show about their trials and tribulations, but a lifestyle, complete with clothes, shoes, cars, real estate, makeup, and other consumable products primed for purchase by their viewers.

Dittmar says, "...TV plays a prominent role in constructing what what individuals see as consumer reality. TV life differs dramatically from social reality because expensive possessions, costly consumer behaviors, and wealth are heavily overrepresented." (Dittmar 2007, 25) This is true of much of what is on television and online, but in keeping with the Kardashian example, we can see this dynamic at work in a germane fashion.

Everything about *Keeping Up* takes the viewer back to something purchase-able, something consumable. The women are also selling their physical bodies in particular ways; for example, Kim Kardashian often promotes beauty products on the show or on her social media accounts. She hypes waist trainers[37], a product which creates a curvier figure, similar to a corset. Consumer culture thus makes these kinds of products and ideals exportable, and these images of Kardashian and her cohort can get into cultural cracks and crevices in ways that they could not before, perhaps before the advent of the internet and the emergence of consumer culture as such a powerful instrument.

The "perfect body" ideal can thus reach people and places otherwise less accessible, in a different era. Perhaps groups who were more resilient or insulated from aggressive demands for thinness, as in subcultures with their own body norms, might be more susceptible to influence via instruments of consumer culture. This could be true in the case of queer and lesbian women, or indigenous women of color, who may have not had the proximity to dominant ideals before the prominence of consumer culture. The now well-known study done with adolescents in Fiji on the impact of consumer culture found that exposure to Western media changed their body ideals within a relatively short amount of time. The 2004 study showed that, "...television appeared to redefine local aesthetic ideals for bodily appearance and presentation. Television scenarios also appeared to stimulate desire to acquire elements of the lifestyles portrayed, including the body shape perceived to be best suited for obtaining a job." (Becker 2004, 540) The marked change documented in the young people of this rural area in Fiji speaks to the

[37] See the Angel Curves website for more

role of consumer culture in defining beauty ideals and standards, even in areas previously isolated from such influence.

We could even conceptualize a show like *The L Word* as an edict on how lesbians should look and act, as it is not unreasonable to imagine young women discovering their burgeoning sexuality while watching the show. If a young woman without exposure to other lesbians only knew what was on *The L Word*, she might think that all or most lesbians are thin, relatively well-off financially, and beautiful. The reach of television and other instruments of consumer culture can define our understanding of ourselves and our bodies in ways that are subtle and insidious.

Capitalism is not a system concerned with morality or altruism. The primary function of capitalism is to generate profit. Therefore, if there is an under-explored market that can be mined for profit, the restlessness of this system will find it, regardless of what it is or what it represents. For example, we could think of the natural hair movement which currently seems to be gaining popularity among women of color. Previously, black women did not have the financial and cultural capital in the United States to be considered a profitable market unto themselves. Now that black women (and men) have more money to spend, likely because of awareness of racism, grassroots activism, and policy changes which allow for class mobility for some black folks, they are emerging as an under-utilized market which can be mined to generate revenue. Although the emergence of this market may be due to activism and altruistic campaigns for equality, capitalism as a system is unconcerned with that piece of market processes. *Why* the market emerged is not the issue, in terms of capitalism. All that matters is that

it's there and it's profitable. The same process by which natural hair products became more lucrative can also be applied to recent "body-positive" corporate campaigns.

For example, the recent Dove Beauty Campaign speaks to these emerging markets and the ways in which "body positivity" (a less radical, more generalized version of fat-positivity) is used to sell products. In their article, "Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign," authors Josee Johnston and Judith Taylor compare the work of a fat activist group with Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign. The Dove campaign, the authors explain,

> promotes itself as a progressive force for women, aligns itself with certain feminist ideas and scholars, engages in 'grassroots' partnering to raise millions of dollars for eating disorder organizations and Girl Scouts programs to build self-esteem, has engaged with prominent gender scholars, and has been widely praised in the popular media. (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 943)

The campaign features several ads in which women are asked to reflect on their low self-esteem and consider the ways the outside world sees them, rather than in the harsh ways they see themselves. In one advertisement, women are asked to describe themselves to an FBI-trained sketch artist, and then a stranger was asked to describe the same woman. The Dove website explains, "The result? Two completely different portraits. The one based on the stranger's portrayal was more beautiful, happier, and more accurate. It proved exactly what we suspected: that you're more beautiful than you think." (Dove website) The campaign is based on the hunch that women hate themselves much more than the rest of the world does.

The description continues, "So to help inspire the millions of women around the world who don't see their own beauty, we created a film showing the women's reactions to their portraits, and the impact of their refreshed view of themselves." (Dove website)

The result is a feel-good, pseudo-feminist advertisement, promoting self-love and patience when it comes to judging one's own appearance. Johnston and Taylor, in their article, want to "move beyond cynical dismissal to empirically investigate and analyze corporate discourse to identify its transformative possibilities and contradictions." (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 941) The impulse to roll one's eyes in "cynical dismissal," as they describe, is not a totally unreasonable reaction, as Dove is owned by Unilever, the same company which owns Axe body spray - a company whose brand, at least until recently, depended on the degradation of women.[38] [39][40]

Additionally, in this ad featuring the drawings, there are no fat women included. We could extrapolate from this exclusion that fat women should not be encouraged to love themselves as they are. One woman comments about the two drawings, saying that the ways she described herself to the artist made her likeness look "closed off and fatter, and sadder too," conflating fatness with sadness as well as perpetuating the idea that fatness cannot be beautiful. Thinness is equated with beauty, once again, and the ad seems to work on the assumption that women's self-worth can be cultivated from within, effectively ignoring the myriad cultural factors which make this difficult, if not impossible (i.e., the aggressive multi-billion dollar beauty industry which relies on women feeling bad about themselves in order to generate profit). Johnston and Taylor also describe a Dove campaign in which "provocative, controversial billboards with images of women in which the public was asked to adjudicate women's attractiveness

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[38] https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/04/18/unilever-faces-criticism-for-real-beauty-ad-campaign

[39] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDLC1e2KBYg

[40] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KlQaBKJftM

(e.g., fat or fabulous?)" (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 952) In this example, like in the drawing advertisement, discursive binary opposition is set up: fat OR fabulous - via this configuration, one cannot be both at the same time. Thus we can see, in these "love yourself" Dove campaigns, the company's "love" might not be the same for all kinds of bodies.

Johnston and Taylor explain that this type of advertising emerges as a kind of "feminist consumerism" in which "one of the more insidious aspects of Dove's appropriation of feminist themes of empowerment and and self-care is its reformulation of feminism as achieved principally through grooming and shopping." (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 955) They continue, "the radical feminism that might require them to be critical of gendered grooming and beauty ideology is absent in feminist consumerism, a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women and that shares consumerism's focus on individual consumption as a primary source of identity, affirmation, and social change." (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 955-6) This type of "empowerment" relies solely on the individual "loving herself" without examining the larger social systems at work that promote and protect sexism, racism, and other types of policies and attitudes that make it difficult for women to suddenly drop this cultural baggage and suddenly love themselves.

Feminist consumerism is also a largely neoliberal endeavor, as the individual feeling or sense of self is prioritized instead of understanding the ways power, systems, and communities interact as sources of liberation and oppression. In her essay, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," Catherine Rottenberg describes the neoliberal feminist,

> Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair. (Rottenberg 2013, 420)

Shopping and grooming oneself to feminist liberation, as Johnston and Taylor examine in their piece about Dove, does nothing to change the structural issues which prevent women and people of color from engaging fully in social and political processes. Johnston and Taylor compare feminist consumerism with racial feminist work when they say, "This [feminist consumerism] enables women to wear an identity associated with self-respect, independence, personal strength, and collective identity and community without doing any of the hard consciousness-raising work usually required to produce collective (rather than simply individual) transformation." (Johnston and Taylor 2008, 956) The individual sense of self is prioritized over any collective work. This kind of approach is a pseudo-feminist Band-aid on a gaping wound that most people, particularly those with more power and access, are unwilling to address. It also precludes large-scale, structural changes from taking place.

I see this when I teach my undergraduates, in their responses to this newly-emerging feminist consumerism which seems to be all around us. They have never been taught to be critical of these corporations, their products, and their strategies, and they eat up campaigns like Dove's. They want to feel good about themselves, understandably, and they are afraid of a more radical feminism which might alienate them from men and make them seem "difficult." Asking them to recognize systems of oppression which

encourage women to hate themselves is much more difficult that accepting a "love yourself" attitude. But, as I explained above, this "love" only extends to certain bodies and certain types of feminine presentation. Thus, we can conclude that the "acceptance" and "love" promoted by Dove is contingent on the amount of profit the company can generate from a "self-loving" population.

The same can be said about the plus-size clothing industry. For example, the low-cost clothing store Old Navy features an entire plus-size clothing line that is almost exclusively sold online; many fat activists wonder if this is because Old Navy wants to profit off fat people but not actually have them in their stores[41]. Additionally, plus-size clothing tends to "hide" fatness, again positioning fatness as something antithetical to beauty and attractiveness, something to be covered up and overcome. Crystal Money, in her article, "Do the Clothes Make the (Fat) Woman", says specifically of the stores Lane Bryant and Catherine's, "While I love that they exist, it is clear they have a message to cover and hide plus-size bodies. Much of Catherine's inventory consists of oversized blouses that have nice floral prints and flare out at the bottom. I not-so-lovingly refer to this as the 'potato sack' style...Both of these stores feel sad." (Money 2017, 14) I personally tried to fit into my "skinny" clothes for way longer than I should have, just because I did not know how to shop for my growing body and because there were so few and such frumpy options for girls like me. Looking good, when I was younger, was the domain of the thin.

[41] https://www.xojane.com/issues/old-navy-charging-more-for-plus-size

While the options are definitely expanding, they are still lacking in terms of style and scope. However, there is some interesting pushback to the idea that fashion is only for the thin - for example, Lany Bryant's #ImNoAngel (see image below) campaign jabbed at the mostly-impossible beauty ideal embodied by Victoria's Secret models, also called "angels" (Money 2017, 16).

Figure 4.10 Lane Bryant's #ImNoAngel campaign

Additionally, plus-size designer Ashley Nell Tipton (see image below) was the winner of season 14's *Project Runway*[42], a fashion design show that mostly features supermodels and/or very thin clothing models.

[42] http://people.com/bodies/ashley-nell-tipton-gastric-bypass-surgery

Figure 4.11 Ashley Nell Tipton

Fat fashion is also thriving on social media, particularly on the website Tumblr, where a search for fat fashionistas can turn up hundreds of posts featuring all kinds of fat bodies[43]. Model Tess Holliday (see image below), a plus-size woman from Mississippi, is a regular staple on body-positive social media platforms and also started the online hashtag #effyourbeautystandards, in which users are encouraged to post pictures of themselves eschewing beauty norms[44].

[43] see https://www.tumblr.com/search/fat+fashio

[44] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3114218/Size-26-model-Tess-Holliday-said-s-happy-called-fat.html

Figure 4.12 Tess Holliday

Social media platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram make is easier for plus-sized folks to connect and share their struggles and triumphs; Holliday and others have channeled that desire for connectivity into their "personal brand" and cultivate community while increasing their own professional visibility. While this process still relies on the mechanisms of capitalist enterprise, it may inspire fewer eye rolls than the Dove campaign. Holliday herself is much bigger than the usual plus-sized models we see, especially in the mainstream. Even though she is selling herself as a model, it perhaps feels slightly more genuine than when we see "body positivity" used in order to hock soap and shower gel.

Holliday, via #effyourbeautystandards is encouraging women to do some online consciousness-raising, that hard work identifying systems of oppression that can be so difficult to pin down, and which the Dove campaign has no interest in dismantling, as they would then likely lose some of their customers. It will be interesting to see if women like Holliday and Tipton can retain their (semi) celebrity status and stay fat, as so often celebrities must lose weight in order to stay in the limelight. Tipton, it was reported by

People in May 2017, recently underwent gastric bypass surgery[45], as many burgeoning fat celebrities do. It remains to be seen if Holliday will do the same.

We can also witness this process of restless capitalism searching for new markets in terms of the "borrowing" that happens as white women mimic black women's bodies and fashion themselves in their likeness. "Juicy" boobs, butts, and thighs, often seen on women of color, are now becoming a commodity for white women to adopt, even though (as I explain in the previous chapter) the histories of white women's and black women's beauty standards differ significantly. For example, white women like reality TV star Kim Kardashian (as well as some of her famous sisters) and rapper Iggy Azalea are known in part for their proximity to blackness, or their approximation of what we understand to be black physical features.

Of course, there are black women of all shapes and sizes, but the history of medical racism in shaping what features we associate with certain bodies cannot be ignored. These expectations put black women in a particularly difficult bind, as they are expected to perform blackness in certain ways that may not be possible for them - like having a big butt if they are small and thin. When Kim Kardashian or Iggy Azalea "borrow" from styles and body types that have traditionally been associated with black women, they contribute to a culture in which blackness is only palatable when performed by a white body. This borrowing would not be as much of a problem in a society wherein anti-black racism is such an issue.

African-American actress Amandla Stenberg asked in her popular Youtube video called "Don't Cashcrop My Cornrows": "What would America be like if we loved Black

[45] http://people.com/bodies/ashley-nell-tipton-gastric-bypass-surgery

people as much as we love Black culture?" Indeed, in the US, where black people have (historically and currently) been enslaved, murdered, raped, and abused, what can we make of this cultural "borrowing", or cultural appropriation? Otherwise, calling Miley Cyrus's twerking[14] "cultural appropriation" does just seem like a slap on the wrist, like telling a naughty girl she's done something wrong, instead of recognizing the deep and painful realities of racism and colonization. So, the big booty on Kim Kardashian or Iggy Azalea is less an appreciation of a big body than it is an expression of the legacy of colonialism marked on the bodies of those who populate our celebrity culture. Thus, the relationship between whiteness, blackness, and fatness on women is complicated and historically loaded. I offer analysis here on the culturally-specific ways in which this relationship has developed in the United States. More research can and should be done on the relationship between fatness and race in other cultural contexts.

4.5 Fat Lovers: Fetishization and Attraction

I feel as though it is my responsibility, within the scope of this project, to address the issue of fatness in porn and fat sexual fetishization. But I am struggling. I am struggling because I think if we could remove the stigma from fat bodies, these phenomena would likely start to dissipate, if not disappear. I feel compelled to address these things because *every time* I bring up fatness and sex, someone inevitably replies, "What about feederism[46]? Or how about chubby chasers[47]?" And while these are (semi)

[46] Researchers Terry and Vasey say, "Feederism is a fat fetish subculture in which individuals eroticize weight gain and feeding. *Feeders* are individuals who claim to become sexually aroused by feeding their partners and encouraging them to gain weight. Conversely, *Feedees* are

socially sanctioned ways of being attracted to fat women, they trouble me. As do the people who insist on bringing them up as a response to my work. Every panel I am on, every class I take – someone brings up, and wants me to discuss at length, these types of fetishization.

In a culture where there is so much animosity for fat women's bodies, is it any surprise that attraction to fat women emerges in complex, and perhaps unhealthy, ways? Researchers Gailey and Prohaska discuss the practice of "hogging", which they define as "a practice whereby men seek out women they deem unattractive or fat for sexual purposes." (Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 13) Gailey and Prohaska explain further that "men may attempt to achieve normative masculinity...through 'hogging', a behavior that involves men seeking out women they perceive as fat...for sport or sexual gratification." (Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 13) The authors quote baseball player Mark Grace, who says, in order to break out of a slump, a player should seek out and have sex with the "fattest gnarliest chick you can uncover." (Dowd 2005, quoted in Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 14) Gailey and Prohaska, in their research, dissect the ways in which hogging intersects with normative masculinity in the US; they want to know if hogging is a way for men to achieve hegemonic masculinity.

In a previous study from 2006, Gailey and Prohaska interviewed men who participated in hogging in order to uncover their motivations. They found that the men "were stigmatized if they could not neutralize their behavior by claiming they were

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individuals who claim to become sexually aroused by eating, being fed, and the idea or act of gaining weight. Very little is known about this population."

[47] Researchers Pyle and Loewy say that chubby chasers are "the term for fat admirers embraced in the big men's community" and that the term mostly applies to fat gay men.

hogging. However, if they claimed they were hogging, their friends rewarded their behavior because it was about having as many sexual encounters as possible; denigrating women who are perceived as fat provides men with a common group of people to belittle." (Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 16) The language that Gailey and Prohaska use here - particularly "neutralize" - is an interesting choice. Are men "hogging" exclusively to adhere to masculine norms? Could the practice be one way for men to express their sexual desire for fat women, while masking it under the guise of hogging to protect themselves from ridicule? If fatness is coded as unfeminine, undesirable, and disgusting, perhaps those who find fat women attractive must go to strange and dysfunctional lengths to avoid chastisement.

Hogging can be understood as an intersection between the polarities of my previously established archetypes: of "too fat to fuck" and "fat girls will do anything." This behavior is a cocktail of both narratives: the men doing the hogging assume that fat women will be readily available, sexually, for whatever they wish to do to them. But the practice also offers a sort of removal from sexual intimacy with fat women; the hoggers are not really *into* these women (or so they say) - it's all for sport. The fat women in this scenario, utterly reduced to objects - anything but actual human beings with thoughts and feelings and an inner life - are framed as desperate, sad, lonely, but ultimately down for anything.

Gailey and Prohaska refer to Goode's research (2008) and reiterate that men who identify as fat admirers (known as FA)

> ...indicated that dating fat women or being sexually involved with fat women attracted almost as much stigma and scorn as being fat does. Therefore, the men...were often covert in their preference for fat women and many would not be seen in public places or admit their preferences to friends and family. Hogging, or

> at least telling their friends they were hogging, served as a way to avoid stigma. (Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 16-17)

The authors vacillate between conceptualizing hogging as a way for fat admirers to express their desire for fat women, and as an expression of aggressive, violent, hegemonic masculinity. They say, "Closeted FAs would not take a fat woman out in public and would often argue that fat women were 'easier' than women who met conventional beauty standards. Again, it is difficult to separate out the hoggers from the closeted FAs." (Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 21) Perhaps this is not an either/or situation. The cultural fascination with fat women's bodies may create scenarios in which men (and women, potentially) are attracted to fat women but cannot express their attraction, or find their own impulses and desires disgusting.

The authors make an important point when they say, "In some instances, men may be interested in women who do not meet the beauty ideal and use hogging as an excuse to avoid ridicule from their friends." (Gailey and Prohaska 2010, 21) I find it difficult, thus, to evaluate pornography or fetishizing because of the constraints put on fat admirers (FA), people who are genuinely and honestly attracted to fat women in the first place. Without a substantive survey or ethnographic project which asks difficult questions of people who are attracted to fat women, it is nearly impossible to make claims about the nature of attraction in these cases.

However, it seems as though public expressions of attraction for fat women are *only* understood through the lens of fetishization, and this deeply troubles me. And it is why I always felt so frustrated in meetings and classes when all it would take was for me to say the words "fat" and "sex" for someone to immediately jump to feederism or other forms of fetishization. Is that the only way we can conceptualize attraction to fat women?

Is this type of attraction so taboo, so beyond the norm, so deviant, that the only possible avenue for fat attraction is via fetish? Herein lies my problem. I think it is irresponsible to not address these issues, as they do pertain to fatness and sexuality. However, I find it nearly impossible, within our current cultural context, to understand fully the motivations of those who fetishize and/or desire fat women.

In *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, author Mona Awad deftly delves into this snared mess of attraction and fetishizing. She tells the story of Beth, or Lizzie, or Elizabeth, or Liz – the same woman who changes her moniker based on how much she weighs. Elizabeth starts out chubby, then is fat, and in each chapter works through some painful reality of life as a fat woman. In a particularly poignant section, Awad explores the deteriorating relationship between Beth and her husband. Beth has lost a massive amount of weight, but is always on edge, hungry and angry, mad about how much effort it takes for her to keep the weight off. After being told how lucky he is to have someone like her, we learn:

> People keep telling him this. They look at Beth, Elizabeth, whatever the hell her name is now, at her long black hair and her smooth, fair skin and how what's left of her flesh is packaged so daintily into a neat, hot little dress and tell him this. But what Tom sees is the stooped-over way she carries herself like her thinness was a punch in the gut, the air of heaviness around her that will never leave. (Awad 2016, 141)

Beth is miserable and so is her husband, Tom. All the aspects of culture which tell us: your life will be better when you lose weight; you will find love, happiness, the right job, admiration, and all of your heart's desires? All of those messages have failed Beth and Tom. Beth is just as unhappy as she was when she was fat, if not more. But now she has no reason to hate herself like she did before. Or so the narrative dictates.

Back to Tom: “He doesn’t feel lucky at all. For one thing, he got lucky a hell of a lot more when she was fat. Now she’s either too hungry or distracted for sex. Or she says she still feels ‘like a stranger in my own body.’” (Awad 2016, 142) Tom yearns for the time when they were in love, back when Beth was fat. The weight loss seems to have made Beth more self-conscious, “And she is just as uncomfortable being naked, obsessed with what she calls ‘the evidence.’ Embarrassed about her shrunken breasts, the slack skin around her middle. She still comes to bed more or less fully clothed and covering parts of herself with her hands, just like she did when she was fat.” (Awad 2016, 142) All the so-called common knowledge about fatness failed them. Their love and sex lives were better when Beth was in her “before” state, instead of everything magically changing for the better after she shed the weight.

Tom is even compelled to drive to his friend’s house, after a few too many drinks, to get a glimpse of the fat girl with whom his friend has amazing “gastro sex.” The friend hides his fat girl away from Tom and their other male friends; Tom, so frustrated with his newly thin, angsty wife, wants to see the “gastro sex” girl so badly he practically beats down his friend’s door to get a look at her. “Tom’s gaze grasps for her shape in the dark but as far as he can see there’s nothing. Her voice sounds nothing like Beth’s…Sighing, Tom removes his foot from the doorframe. The door slams in his face.” (Awad 2016, 144) This is not the narrative we are accustomed to witnessing when we hear about fat women and sex. Tom liked his wife when she was fat, he liked her body more and he liked her personality more. He liked her ability to let go, to have fun, to find joy in life - things she seems far too preoccupied to do now. The story culminates with Tom returning

home to his thin, pissed-off wife to find she's discovered a specific type of pornography on his computer.

> He finds her sitting at the desk with his laptop open before her. Her back is to him, her bony shoulder blades pointed at him like arrows of accusation, the moans of all of his uncleared history boomeranging through the small, thin-walled room. It looks to him like the one he watched the other night about the two fat maids, specifically the scene in which they demonstrate their versatility to their employers. Only he doesn't remember it being this loud. In the window's reflection, he can see her hand covering her mouth, her expression frozen in horror and disgust and fascination. (Awad 2016, 146-7)

Awad does a masterful job in her book, and especially in this particular story, of illustrating the convoluted ways in which attraction to fat women manifests. Because it is not acceptable to be fat, it is not acceptable to be attracted to fat people. Attraction to fat people indicates disorder, deviance, or dereliction of some kind.

So of course it will surface in convoluted ways. Beth could not be happy as a fat woman, because fat is wrong and bad in our culture. Thus, the woman Tom fell in love with has changed into someone he does not love, someone who he did not fall in love with. His attraction to fat women comes out in his drunken visit to his buddy's house, in his efforts to glimpse his friend's fat sexual partner, or in the porn her stashes away on his computer. He looks for Beth in the faceless, nameless fat girl who his friend is too embarrassed to introduce to his boys. He looks for Beth in the fat porn he watches, and confirms her worst fears when she discovers the fat maid video on his laptop. As he watches Beth watch the maids in flagrante, "He can see she is…transfixed by the fat girls, by the spectacle of flesh which she [ran] countless miles to shed, by the ecstasy which she is now too hungry and tired and angry to summon." (Awad 2016, 147) All the work Beth did to change herself into something more desirable, more beautiful, and more perfect (in the eyes of society), all made her less desirable to her husband.

But because it is taboo to express attraction to fat girls, the two had no way of communicating their needs and desires to one another. The only way Tom could satisfy his desire for fat women (without cheating on his wife, of course), then, was to turn to porn. Thus enacting the very point I am trying to make: fetishizing fat people, via pornography or "chubby chaser" parties or any other avenue, is one of the only socially acceptable ways to express attraction for fat women, and fat people generally. Like Gailey and Prohaska said, it then becomes impossible to separate those who are fetishizing fat women and those who are seeking a genuine sexual connection with fat women. Until we get to a place in which fat sexuality and attraction is less taboo, it remains difficult to evaluate these cultural elements in ways that honestly represent the dynamics at play.

Erich Goode, in his article, "The Fat Admirer" says of men attracted to fat women, "There are perhaps millions of men in the United States who have a sexual preference and engage in sexual practices that run so sharply against the grain of conventional taste and behavior that most Americans would either refuse to believe in their existence or would regard their sexuality as 'sick' - a kind of 'fetish.'" (Goode 1983, 81)[48] Goode observes the complicated distinction between attraction and fetish. Because fat-attraction is subversive, running counter to what we would call "normal" sexuality, men may be unable or unwilling to express their attractions. Goode discusses this, and distinguishes between what he calls "closet" fat admirers (FA) and "overt" fat admirers.

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[48] It's important to mention here that Charlotte Cooper, in her text *Fat Activism,* asserts that Erich Goode was unethical in his methods while conducting this research. (Cooper 2016, 20) She claims he "was able to abuse his position as a researcher with impunity, sexually exploiting a number of informants." (Cooper 2016, 116) This speaks to specific issues that come up when researching hyper-marginalized populations; it is also highly problematic that his is one of the only published existing studies on this population.

He says, "As with homosexuals, some FAs are overt and open about their preference; they are 'out of the closet' in expressing their desire for obese women.' In contrast, others are 'closet' FAs: They don't want anyone to know that they date extremely fat women." (Goode 1983, 83)

This "closeting" Goode describes is part of what makes it so difficult to chronicle and document fat attraction. This self-concealment also makes it difficult for fat women to find sexual partners. Goode continues, "An overt FA is willing to be seen in public on a date with a fat woman; to acknowledge his preference to friends and family; and, if he is dating a fat woman on a regular basis, acknowledge that the two are a couple and that he prefers his partner at her current weight. An overt FA can easily imagine being married to a fat woman; indeed, he relishes the idea." (Goode 1983, 83) This type of courtship Goode describes more closely resembles a "normal" or at least more typical way of dating, wherein attraction for and by both parties is out in the open.

Goode contrasts "overt" fat attraction with "closeted" fat attraction - closeted attraction taking place undercover, hidden from view of friends, family, and the public. He says, "A 'closet' FA does not wish to be seen in public with his fat date and will usually not accompany her to a restaurant or a movie. He does not acknowledge his preference to friends or family and will minimize the importance of his relationship with fat women should others find out about it." (Goode 1983, 83) Most fat women I talk to (about my project or about life and love more generally) have encountered what Goode calls a "closet" FA.

A friend and I were just discussing how we marvel at men who want to hold our hands in public. I was stunned, while dating my now-husband, when he proudly kissed

me in public and happily introduced me to his family. I had never experienced something like it before. Goode continues, "Some closet FAs may even 'keep a thin girlfriend on the side' as a cover. A common lament by closet cases is 'I love the way you feel in bed, but I can't stand the way you look on the street.'" (Goode 1983, 83) I mentioned earlier my experience with a young man who had a thin girlfriend all while spending night after night in my bed; he even brought her to a show where our (his and my) band was playing, showing her off to our other friends and bandmates while I downed drink after drink trying to ignore how I felt about him. Before I met my husband, I was used to being desired by night but then considered an embarrassment in the light of day.

To further complicate matters, fat women (and society at large) may misunderstand fat attraction and label it a fetish, simply because it is not often expressed openly and thus can be easily misunderstood. Goode continues, "Further, the predilections and experiences of these men are so well concealed that they have almost totally escaped serious study by sociologists and psychologists." (Goode 1983, 81) Goode is right. The amount of material available, especially scholarly material, on the topic of fat attraction is minimal at best.

I found Goode's article itself in an anthology called *Extreme Deviance* - a revealing title. As I perused the anthology, I found fat attraction to be lumped in with the following forms of so-called "extreme deviance" - believing one has been kidnapped by aliens, believing in white supremacy, having and endorsing adult-child sexual contact, engaging in S & M, and extreme tattooing and body modification. (Goode et al, 2007) So we can see what kinds of deviance fat attraction is associated with, which speaks to the ways we view and understand people who are attracted to fat women. When I told my

husband he was apparently in the same category as NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) members he chuckled and rolled his eyes. And if the statistics about the so-called obesity epidemic are true, and more and more people worldwide are becoming fat, how can we make sense of this categorization? Is, then, every person who has sex with a fat woman in the same discursive realm as child molesters?

I did discover some instances in which attraction to fat women is presented in a more normalized fashion. In 2011, the *Village Voice* did a story called "Guys Who Like Fat Chicks" with this image featured as the header of the article (see image below).

Figure 4.13 Image from the Village Voice piece on Dan Weiss

The research compiled here refers mostly to men who are exclusively attracted to fat women. There is certainly more research to be done regarding men and women who are

attracted to a wide variety of bodies. However, it is more common to find discourse about those who are exclusive fat admirers.

The *Village Voice* article from 2011 focuses on one particular guy who "likes fat chicks," Dan Weiss. Weiss started an advice blog for fat admirers and advertised his blog as a place for "your plumper-related stumpers." In the feature, Weiss talks openly about his love for fat women, and the article says,

> In person at the East Village's Cafe Orlin, Dan explains that, yes, he likes round bellies. He likes double chins. He likes breasts the size of his head. He *loves* flabby biceps. 'Fat upper arms are awesome. I would almost say I'm an arms guy,' he says, not by any means whispering. 'I didn't know that they would be that soft. I, like, fell asleep on a girl's arm once. I was like, 'Wow.'" (Village Voice 2011)

Weiss explains that as far as his blog title goes,

> the phrase 'Fat Chicks' was meant to be a reversal of the college-humor slogan 'No Fat Chicks.' And in the online world of Facebook groups and BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) messageboards that Dan inhabits, 'fat' is preferable to 'overweight,' which implies a standard, or 'hefty,' which belongs to the trash bag, or 'heavy,' which sounds like furniture. (Village Voice 2011)

Weiss is aware of the fine line between fetish and loving appreciation, and he explicitly addresses this in a piece published in *The Hairpin*. He distinguishes between the two by saying, "I've heard dudes start the 'I only date girls over_____pounds' contest. I'm all for personal preferences, but when you're bragging about your requirements, you're in it for the boys, not the girls." (The Hairpin, 2010) Weiss distinguishes between fetish and genuine attraction in this case by addressing the toxic masculine bonding that sometimes happens between men as they pursue the objects of their desires. Similar to the dynamics at work in the practice of "hogging," (which I explain above) Weiss contends that when men are more interested in bonding with other men about their desires over interacting with the *actual women they desire*, something is not quite right.

In another article about his love for fat women published on *The Hairpin*, Weiss addresses the common misperception that fat people are not as sexual as the rest of the population. He jokes that he is not the first, or the last, to have love for fat bodies. He says,

> Am I part of the first generation to inherently reject Calvin Klein heroin-chic and go on to become completely desensitized to the nearly-naked thin bodies that any kid can discover on 1 out of 3 magazine covers? *Am I just a better person than you?* Don't be silly. The point is I exist regardless of rationale and I am not alone. In fact, I'm *very* not alone. With that crazy old "obesity epidemic" sweeping the nation like Beatlemania these days, do you think really more than 60% of the population ain't getting laid? And for that matter, you think everyone hooking up with that 60% is ashamed or keeping in on the DL? (The Hairpin, 2010)

Via his blog and the online visibility it affords him, Weiss tries to bring up a point I have often made to people who think fat folks are all big losers who sit at home on Friday nights stuffing their faces full of rotisserie chicken: we are not what you think we are. We love, live, and work like anyone else. We have sex like anyone else. People are attracted to us, and even love us, like anyone else. But you would never know it from most popular culture representations of fat people, particularly fat women. No one ever told me I could be loved if I was fat. I did not think it was even a *possibility* for me to be loved while fat. I, and other women, are living proof that this is not true. But stereotypes about deviant sexuality still plague fat women, and those who are attracted to fat women still often hide in the margins of society.

The *Village Voice* feature on Weiss chronicles the important role of the Internet in fat attraction. The author of the article, Camille Dodero, says,

> Once upon a time, if a young man wanted to see a fat girl naked, he actually had to woo her. *Playboy* and *Penthouse* didn't publish stretch-mark mapped centerfolds. BBW nude-model paysites like PlumpPrincess.com and BigCuties.com did not exist. Dan didn't have that problem. 'An early memory was having *Entertainment Weekly,* cutting out pictures of Anna Nicole Smith in the

> Guess Ads, and just studying her boobs.' But unlike his Fat-Appreciating forebears, he had the Internet. 'I was looking for bigger and bigger boobs online, and when you looked at bigger and bigger boobs, you wound up finding bigger girls. And I was like, 'Oh, *wait.* I like all of this.'" (Village Voice, 2011)

There is, of course, the availability of breast implants and the rare super-skinny woman with naturally huge boobs, but if someone is attracted to big breasts, they will likely be found on a woman who has big everything else. But admitting or realizing you are attracted to fat women is not a simple process in our cultural climate of anti-obesity rhetoric and disgust for fat bodies. It may take some time or for some event to occur in order for a person to realize they are attracted to fat bodies, because it is not framed as "normal." Young men (or women) might not see examples of people attracted to fat women, and therefore think their desires are wrong or bad, similar to any other kind of sexuality marginalized as "deviant." For example, the *Village Voice* article documents the experience of Kevin,

> a marine biology doctoral candidate at the University of Maine, Orono, [who] figured it out on the school bus. “This girl sat next to me, and she was about 300 pounds—she was gorgeous, she was blond,” the class of 2000 high school graduate offers over the phone. That day, everyone had to sit three to a seat. “I was up against the window, she had to push up against me, and the other kid was sitting with one ass cheek hanging off the seat. I’m just sitting there with my backpack on my lap, like, ‘Huhhhh.’ ” That was the first public erection he ever had. “You realize, ‘I think I like this.’ (Village Voice, 2011)

For Kevin, it took this physical interaction to realize he was attracted to fat women. It took an erection in a public place for him to actualize this aspect of his sexuality. Dan Weiss, the focus of the *Voice* feature explains why he is so attracted to fat women when he says, "It’s like one big boob." The article continues

> That’s Dan’s shorthand explanation for what it’s like to be with fat women, what their bodies feel like naked, and the physical attributes he’s found himself attracted to his entire life. If it sounds crass, well, that’s the best way he can explain his fat attraction to other straight guys who express befuddlement and

> disgust. 'It’s the same property: Men like fondling soft breasts, and I don’t get why that doesn’t apply to the whole body.' (Village Voice, 2011)

My husband expresses similar sentiments when we talk about my body and why he likes it so much. He tells me how much he loves my big, fat body - how soft it is, how it feels like one big pillow, and how comforting my body is to him. I talked to my husband about our relationship recently, and here is some of what he said.

Jack: "just like, um, I think I like to be, to be able to like, put my fingers into something...get like flesh in between the cracks of my fingers. I think that's just, like, satisfying to me. And like, when we're having sex, I like grabbing your thighs, and grabbing all sorts of stuff, but I also like it all, like when we're going kind of like faster, harder, um, everything just kind of like bouncing (laughs) um, I really like that...sometimes I'll stop, like if I've been touching your boobs, like when we're getting towards the end, and we're going hard (laughs), I will stop touching your boobs to just watch them bouncing."

We also talked at length about masculine norms and the ways men (and most people), but especially straight men, are "programmed" to think about fat women. Jack said he wouldn't have called himself a fat admirer or identified as someone who was attracted to fat women before we got together. He said he liked me, liked how I looked, and liked how I acted, so he pursued me and we started dating. It was only after we started dating, and via our conversations about feminism and fatness that he realized he was attracted to fat women.

He described the process as one of unlearning prevailing wisdom, deprogramming himself from masculine norms which dictate that "fat women are gross and you don't fuck them if you're normal." Now that we've been together and he has been able to

become more sexually free within the confines of our relationship, he finds himself attracted to fat women openly and without reserve. But before me, he wouldn't have identified himself as an FA. Alternately, Erich Goode discusses fat admirer Fred, who he says is

> very overt about his preference [for fat women]. Everyone in his life is aware of it. He freely explains to anyone who is interested exactly what turns him on about large women. "Look," Fred explains, "I'm a jiggle junkie. I love to play with unsupported flesh, I love curves and roundness. Nothing compares with a body of a fat woman - their flesh yields to my touch." (Goode 1983, 84)

Rarely are sentiments like Fred's made in public. His honesty may seem a little shocking to those who do not consider fat women to be appropriate objects of sexual desire. But he is far from alone. It seems that men who find fat women attractive express some similar feelings about the "extra-feminine"-ness of a fat woman's body, or as Dan says, "It's like one big boob." I found this comment on an online forum with commenters discussing fat attraction,

> I am attracted to women full stop and don't have a narrow view of what I am attracted to, but when I am attracted to a fat woman I find that they are kinda 'extra' feminine - soft and curvy features, rounder faces (more feminine). This applies generally but I find it applies extra when I meet an attractive woman who is fat. (Quora.com forum)

This comment speaks to a slightly more complicated attraction, and one that is not commonly represented in popular culture. It is likely that there are many men and women who do not have a specific body "type" when it comes to attraction. But because of the controlling images I detailed in this project, it becomes a much more difficult task to accurately represent the nuanced nature of attraction when fat women are positioned as either miserable and sexless or hypersexually deviant. Perhaps more and different

representations of fat women can lead to a more interesting and expansive understanding of sexual attraction.

Additionally, it sometimes seems, though, that sentiments like the above commenter's about fat women's bodies are only applicable to women with a certain kind of body shape - the hourglass figure. But however this comment was meant, we could conceptualize attraction to a fat woman's body in terms of this "extra"-ness - extra fat in certain places on the body can symbolize extra-femininity. This runs counter to the ways in which fat women are often represented in popular culture, however, as they are often portrayed as less feminine - like Melissa McCarthy in *Bridesmaids*, with her tomboy-like presentation, along with the assertive physical and sexual aggression.

Dan Weiss seems to have taken on a role of fat-attraction evangelical; he is a man on a mission. From the same Village Voice article, again

> Dan likes to imagine a Guys Who Likes Fat Chicks census. “So many girls end up entering the [FA] community just because of one guy,” he says. “Just discovering ‘Wow, I can be attractive!’ And that changes your life. It just never occurred to you before, which is so weird,” he pauses. “That’s why I’m willing to put my life—if you want to call it that—on the line for this.”

Weiss' sentiment speaks to the greater issue I address in this project. It's rare for us fat women to be able to conceive of other people being attracted to us. This, of course, can lead self-esteem problems and dysfunctional relationships. Most thin women can see themselves reflected and desired in romantic cultural representations. For fat women, romance very well may be unimaginable.

In order to ameliorate this, fat acceptance and fat activism often focus on improving fat people's self-esteem rather than focusing on external validation. This is often helpful for people who struggle with self-loathing because of their size. Fat-

positivity certainly helped me feel less alone, and more confident. But there is something special and different inherent in finding out that someone loves your body unconditionally, and is not only sleeping with you for your great sense of humor or your cooking skills. There is something important about learning that a sexual partner even *prefers* your body over other ones.

Because fat women so rarely see ourselves reflected in popular culture experiencing love and affection, I think it becomes common to think that *everyone in the world* is repulsed by our bodies. I still tend to feel that way and I have a wonderful partner who tells me how much he loves my body frequently. Yet, people are attracted to fat women. It's real. As I've noted, we likely cannot get a clear picture of how many people feel this affection, simply because the attraction is so taboo. But they are out there. And perhaps articles like the one from the *Voice* can embolden people to "come out" and express their appreciation for fat women openly.

CHAPTER 5. FAT IS FINE? NORMALIZING FAT

What does it mean, or look like, to normalize a type of body that is marginalized? One use of the term “normalize” can be traced to the work of Michel Foucault, and is applied as such in Susan Bordo’s writing on the self-correction that forms such a prominent part of women’s daily lives. She says, in *Unbearable Weight,* that "homogenized images [of what is considered beautiful] *normalize* - that is, they function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines,' and 'corrects' itself. (Bordo 1993, 25) Bordo's conceptualization of a "normalizing" process is one by which bodies are made to feel different, or ugly, and then efforts are made to correct

these differences, therefore normalizing and regulating the body. So while these models work toward homogeneity, they do so by highlighting deviance. As Michel Foucault explains,

> In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them to one another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences. (Foucault 1975, 184)

In this chapter, I use the term "normalization" differently—more colloquially—as referring to attempts to liberate the fat body from all of the (negative) attributes that are associated with it, through the creation of representations that resist marking the fat body as deviant. In what follows, to "normalize" the fat body means to position it as a type of body no different from any other - thin, tall, short, etc - something that can be noticed but not condemned. I hesitate to use the word "natural" here, simply because it is overused and often oversimplified, but for lack of a better word, I am looking for representations that naturalizes the fat body, and treat it as a normal part of human variation.

The process of normalizing a marginalized group of people is complicated. It necessitates challenging stereotypes, but challenging stereotypes is not enough so long as the challenge comes by way of positive representations that function as "exceptions." This is so because the positive exception acquires its meaning against the backdrop of more dominant stereotypes. And even when the conditions that created those stereotypes have changed, the images and associations remain embedded in the cultural imagination.

Consider, for example, the difficulty in challenging the ways racialized imagery from the last hundred years or so has shaped the ways black people and other people of

color are understood and "read." We may have elected a Black president, but he was continually represented as exceptional, particularly in his civility. As such, he was a measure of the fact that we still live with associations made between black men and primitivity depicted in *The Birth of a Nation,* which was released in 1915. In what scholars say was the first big blockbuster film, images of a black man attempting to rape a white woman (and the woman responding by throwing herself off a cliff) were proliferated across the country and into peoples' neighborhood theaters[49]. The ideas for this film came from bubbling anxieties about black peoples' freedom after slavery was abolished. The myth of the black male rapist, Angela Davis writes, "was a distinctly political invention." (Davis 184) This invention was useful, she explains, "for the rape charge turned out to be the most powerful of several attempts to justify the lynching of Black people." (Davis 185)

Lynching was used as a mechanism of control against black people; it was a tool of domination, deployed especially after the Civil War. (Davis) Ida B Wells' activism and writing in *Red Record* sought to expose the ways in which this myth was a white creation for political gain. But while the specific politics may have changed, the imagery and ideas of black men's uncontrollable sexuality have remained. Anxieties about black men's masculinity and sexuality can be witnessed today in cases of police violence against black men and in the disproportionate attention paid to black men's crimes as opposed to white men's[50]. And when former President Barack Obama was framed, during his presidency, as so exceptionally "well-spoken" and "eloquent", even by supporters,

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[49] see documentary *Birth of a Movement*

[50] see documentary *13th*

contrasting ideas about black men's primitivity clearly lurked in the background, and were the reason why his stateliness was deemed so striking. Thus, seemingly innocuous or even complimentary comments can carry racist ideology with them.

Similar difficulties exist when we consider standards for beauty. There is the dominant historical bias for light skin, a legacy of racist ideology that persisted virtually unchallenged in the world of fashion until very recently. For decades, Naomi Campbell was one of the few very successful dark-skinned women to integrate into the world of high fashion. She was celebrated, but so long as she was exceptional, her presence - even when presented as beautiful - continued to remind us that she is "other." Things may be changing, true, but it is still often the case that when women with dark skin are "included" in fashion spreads or on the runway, it is just that - an attempt at "inclusion" - which only serves to highlight who is "supposed" to be there. The noticeable existence of a Lupita Nyong'o in film or Grace Jones in modeling and music speaks to what we consider "normal" in these fields.

In these cases, and as we will see in the case of fashion reality show *Project Runway*'s attempts to integrate plus-sized fashion into their repertoire, outsiders are still considered "tokens" or it is assumed they are only included because of their difference - as perhaps a nod to "diversity." It is also assumed that those who are "normal" (thin, white, able-bodied, etc) will be included, especially as it pertains to who is deemed "beautiful" by fashion industry movers and shakers. In order for the marginalized to become normalized — to achieve a future in which we do not have to be reminded that a black man *can* be eloquent or a fat woman *can* be beautiful-- more widespread, systemic changes are required than a handful of positive representations. At the same time, getting

there *does* require challenging sedimented negative stereotypes. The trick is to do this in a way that doesn't inadvertently reinforce those stereotypes.

5.1 Making Fat Fine

As I've discussed throughout, while I was growing up, I never really saw fat women in media portrayed in a positive or even value-neutral way. In 2018, this is changing a bit. For example, the HBO show *Girls* features Lena Dunham's unconventional body and physical shape, and also included a small side-story in which one of the leading men on the show starts dating a character played by comedian Aidy Bryant (see image below), a comedian on *Saturday Night Live*.

Figure 5.1 Aidy Bryant

The final scene with the two characters shows them kissing, awkwardly but adorably, on a carousel as they go up and down on the horses. It might not seem like a lot, but just watching a fat woman have a "normal" courtship, in which she gets to have a cute first kiss with someone, is pretty unconventional. Bryant was also recently featured as a supporting character in the film *The Big Sick*, in which her body seemed to be a relative non-issue. She also gets significant screen time on *Saturday Night Live*, in addition to the other funny, unconventional women on the show like Kate McKinnon and Leslie Jones.

Another fat woman character pushing the bounds of typical representation is Donna Lynne Champlin's Paula (see image below) on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend.*

Figure 5.2 Paula Proctor

The program is a drama-musical-comedy and takes a feminist lens to the "rom-com" genre, deconstructing what it means for women to be culturally encouraged to chase romantic love to the detriment of their careers, friendships, and other interpersonal relationships. Champlin plays the middle-aged, married-with-two-kids Paula Proctor, a frustrated, sarcastic paralegal who is too smart to play the supporting sidekick role. The character's genius is that Paula *is* the supporting role to Rachel Bloom's Rebecca (the

crazy ex-girlfriend herself), but as the series progresses, we witness the deconstruction of the "fat woman sidekick" that is a staple in the rom-com genre.

We watch Paula shrug off the fat woman sidekick role and pursue her own ambitions, a rare trajectory which breathes new life into this tired old trope. For example, when Paula and Rebecca begin to realize that their friendship (founded on Rebecca's pursuit of her high school ex-boyfriend) is not based on a healthy, reciprocal foundation, Paula, instead of continuing to take the back seat, applies to law school and pursues her dream of becoming a lawyer. When she becomes pregnant after finding out she has been admitted to into law school, she battles with the decision for a while, and then has an abortion. I like to call this plotline "the ordinary abortion story" not because Paula didn't consider her options carefully and thoughtfully, as most women do when they have abortions, but because this side-story deals with abortion in a normalizing, rational, compassionate way by showing Paula decide what is best for her family and ambitions, and weighing the decision like any grown, mature woman would.

Paula is also neither exclusively hypersexual nor sexless; as a married woman with two children, she goes through dry spells with her husband but they also finds ways to rekindle their passions. Paula's body is not positioned as a problem to be solved, and the character is dynamic and profoundly human. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* has other fat people in the show, and creator Aline Brosh McKenna has been explicit about wanting to have "normal-looking" people on-screen[51]. Here, "normal" connotes a sense of the typical and ordinary.

[51] McKenna discussed this in a Vulture podcast about the program

Unlike some other programs that feature fat people, the fat and/or chubby people on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* are not mocked mercilessly. They simply exist. But even in this portrayal, which is definitely fat-positive compared to many other representations, the word "fat" is still used in typical, degrading ways: for example, the audience is often privy to main character Rebecca Bunch's inner monologue, in which she berates herself for being too fat in comparison to the other, more slender women characters closer to her age. The word is not, however, lobbed at Paula as an insult, creating tension regarding body image and weight standards for the different characters and within their plotlines. The different expectations for Rebecca and Paula could be explained by their age, as Paula is older, has children, and Rebecca is young and childless.

Paula is allowed to have a complicated interior life in ways that are unusual for fat women on-screen. This, in addition to the deconstruction of the "fat girl sidekick" in Paula's character development and storylines, highlights a way in which fat women can be represented on television in value-neutral ways, if not fat-positive. Important to this process is providing fat women characters complexity and depth of character, as writers often do for thin characters.

One of the first popular television programs to do this was *Roseanne* during the late 1980s and 1990s. When I was young, *Roseanne* was strictly forbidden in our house. I remember my parents' less-than-flattering comments about the show's titular character and creator, Roseanne Barr (and Arnold, some of the time), and that commentary stuck with me. I remember Roseanne's controversial performance of the Star-Spangled Banner and the public's anger which came after. She was reviled by people like my mother, a mild-mannered, conservative, Catholic housewife who tried her best to never rock the

boat. So, when I watched the entirety of *Roseanne* during my late twenties, with the man who would become my husband, I was stunned by its radical politics. The show is certainly not perfect, nor is Barr. She has been called out recently for her attitude towards transgender people[52] and online-brawled with feminist writer and fat activist Lindy West over the use of rape jokes in comedy[53]. The 2018 reboot of the show featured Roseanne as a Donald Trump supporter, contrasted with her sister, Jackie, as a Hillary Clinton supporter. The new version of the show sparked massive controversy, in conjunction with Roseanne's online presence in which she referred to Valerie Jarrett, former advisor to Barack Obama, as an "ape[54]" and was subsequently removed from the show. Her controversial support of Trump, as well as her casual racism in comments like the one about Jarrett, proved to be lightning rods in the court of public opinion, and ultimately proved to be too much of a liability for the ABC network. While Roseanne was always a divisive figure in popular culture, even when the original show was airing, her drift to the political right proved too problematic for the general viewing public and the network.

However, the portrayal of fat, working-class Midwestern people in the original *Roseanne* is still surprisingly nuanced, even today. The old episodes also stand in stark contrast to the rebooted, conservative new version of the program. In the original version, Roseanne (the character) has frank discussions with her teenage daughters about sex, birth control, and menstruation; working-class masculinity is addressed and

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[52] https://jezebel.com/5955448/roseanne-barr-accused-of-transphobia-after-negative-tweet-about-green-party-candidate-jill-stein

[53] http://www.xojane.com/issues/lindy-west-roseanne-twitter-rape-jokes

[54] https://ew.com/tv/2018/07/26/roseanne-barr-valerie-jarrett-sean-hannity-insults-hair/

deconstructed; there are several gay and lesbian characters in the show; Roseanne and her husband Dan (played by John Goodman) have a relatively diverse circle of friends, including those gay/lesbian folks and people of color. Roseanne and Dan (see image below) frankly discuss the trials and tribulations of being working-class white people as the industry-driven Midwestern economy shifts and the good, stable jobs start to disappear.

Figure 5.3 Dan and Roseanne Conner

The show (and especially Roseanne's character) takes a fresh approach to motherhood, rejecting traditional notions of submissive femininity in favor of a more brash, demanding, opinionated kind of woman and mother. Not only is Roseanne an unconventional woman character, so is her daughter, Darlene; so is her sister, Jackie, as well as other women who come and go throughout the series' run. The program features men who are gentle and caring, supportive of the brash women in their lives. Both Dan and Roseanne

are fat, and the topic of body size and weight-loss rarely come up. Their children sometimes kid them about being fat and their appetites for food, but the jokes seem to be mostly good-natured. Dan and Roseanne have an active sex life; their good, satisfying sex together is referenced more than just one or twice.

An example is, season one, episode eleven, called "Canoga Time," in which the couple fights about giving away their belongings so to clear out their cluttered house. The fight culminates with Dan and Roseanne taking turns throwing each other's household "junk" out the front door of their house. As their battle of wills escalates, Dan throws their furniture out the front door, then he turns to Roseanne and says, panting heavily, his voice heavy with desire: "Let's go to bed" and the audience whoops. The two run off to bed, Dan chasing Roseanne caveman-style. We next see them in bed, assumedly post-coitus, as the credits roll, and Dan says: Tell me miss, will you still respect me in the morning?

Roseanne: (laughs) I'll respect you in the morning, in the afternoon, and especially at night.

(The two tickle each other and giggle. Dan makes animal noises at Roseanne. The phone rings. Dan growls in annoyance but answers the phone.)

Dan: Heellllloooo, Dan's House of Ecstasy. Oh hi, Mrs. Tucker. (Roseanne lovingly plays with Dan's ear; he smiles and swats her away.) Yeah, that's our stuff out in the front lawn. (Dan smiles at Roseanne. She continues to stroke his hair.) Just a second. (Dan turns to Roseanne.) Honey?

Roseanne: Huh?

Dan: How much do we want for the coffee table? (Audience laughs, fade out.)

During this scene in the bedroom, we also see that Dan and Roseanne's bedroom is in disarray; chairs are overturned and their stuff is all over the floor. We gather that the two have had some wild and satisfying sex, for both parties involved. The two look at each other lovingly, their pillow-talk tender and affectionate. They both face the bottom of the bed, with the sheets and comforter strewn about, signs again pointing to their wild carnal encounter. They both seem happy, satisfied, and in love.

I was stunned when I first watched this scene. I am stunned again, now, and wonder if a scene like this would even air in today's cultural climate. *Roseanne* existed on what seems to be the cusp of panic about the modern "obesity epidemic" which now dominates our national (and some international) conversations about the fat body (Lyons). Certainly, and as I have previously outlined, pressures to be thin are not new, and go through changes as time passes. However, the government-led campaign to fight obesity emerged in the 1990s, shaping public policy. Pat Lyons, in "Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the "Obesity Epidemic," explains that "Former US surgeon general C. Everett Koop, MD, declared a public health 'war on obesity' and initiated the Shape Up America! (SUA!) campaign in 1995 with over one million dollars in funding from Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Slim-Fast (Fraser 1997)." *Roseanne* first aired in 1988 and ended in 1997. Our cultural ideas about the so-called epidemic are undoubtedly shaped by this government-led declaration of war, and *Roseanne* first aired right before this decree.

When I watch the original *Roseanne,* I am amazed at how much of a non-issue Dan and Roseanne's bodies are. Typically, when I watch a television show with fat people in it, I am constantly bracing myself for the barrage of fat jokes which, more

recently, seems to be inevitable. But while watching the nine seasons of *Roseanne*, I learned I could relax, calm down, breathe a little easier, because the fat characters were not constantly faced with ridicule and criticism in respect to their bodies. In *The Fat Studies Reader,* Bernstein and St John say of the series,

> ...*Roseanne* centered around the lives of a fat couple, but their weight was, amazingly enough, never the punch line. When Barr spoke about fat in interviews, she went beyond the rhetoric of self-acceptance to a feminist analysis of fat. This was the first time that such statements were widely published, and the public reactions were strong on both sides of the issue. (Bernstein and St John 2009, 267)

Roseanne (the show), as well as the person, were most certainly lightning rods in terms of cultural attention, likely because of their approach to the fat body and the normalization of it on the program. The sight of a fat woman living her life, both onscreen and off, was enough to draw plenty of ire. Writing for *The Guardian* about the reboot of *Roseanne*, before it aired, Zoe Williams says of the cultural attitudes dominating the time when the original series aired, "This was the 1990s; previously, only models had to be model-skinny; suddenly, everyone did. Excess weight was a sign of weak character, or passivity. Why would a person like that be good at anything[55]?" Williams echoes and confirms the theories and analysis put forth by Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight*, in which fat is equated with lack of control, loose morality, poor work ethic, and other unenviable personality traits. *Roseanne* showed the interior lives of fat, working class people. This is rare, then and now; *if* we see beyond the "headless fatty[56]" (a term coined in order to

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[55] https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jul/01/return-roseanne-sitcom-broke-all-the-rules

[56] see Charlotte Cooper's article "Headless Fatties" here: http://charlottecooper.net/fat/fat-writing/headless-fatties-01-07/. In this article, Cooper explains, " Every hand-wringing article

describe the ways fat people are represented especially in news programs, headless and only showing their fat mid-sections), we often see very little in the way of complex humanity being portrayed.

Additionally, to be poor (or working-class) and fat is a double whammy; too many people assume that poverty is a result of one's own personal and professional failings, similar to fatness being a result of lack of willpower and therefore a personal failure. Dan and Roseanne Conner embodied both of these so-called "failures." Williams continues,

> You are still allowed to be fat on TV, indeed, you are positively welcomed, should a romantic lead or a policeman need a slow-witted sidekick. .. You wouldn't be allowed to be sexual; you wouldn't be allowed to be not on a diet.. This new norm - that you can only be imperfect if you are in constant combat with your imperfection - loops back to the prevailing take on poverty, that it can only be the result of some deficiency in the person living it.

The main characters on *Roseanne* were a dramatic departure from these norms. And a welcome one at that; the show was a massive success[57]. *Roseanne* showed that working-class white people were just that: working. And working quite hard, to be clear. Roseanne and Dan have many jobs throughout the series, and the show portrays the struggles of a family working without a safety net.

Instead of showing working-class, poor people as lazy, unmotivated, or entitled (which some classist political rhetoric does[58]), *Roseanne* instead showed the ways in which class mobility in the United States is not as simple as rhetoric about the "American

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about the financial cost of obesity, and every speechifying press release about the ticking time bomb of obesity seemed to be accompanied by a photograph of a fat person, seemingly photographed unawares, with their head neatly cropped out of the picture."

[57] ttp://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/15/arts/roseanne-tops-cosby-in-the-nielsen-ratings.html

[58] see 2014 Pew Study: "Most See Inequality Growing, but Partisans Differ Over Solutions"

Dream" seems to insinuate. Both Dan and Roseanne work in low-wage jobs trying to get ahead, and both of them start their own separate businesses during the series run: Roseanne, a diner, and Dan, a motorcycle shop. But the struggling Midwest economy (they are in a small town in Illinois) does not always offer a plethora of financial opportunity and stability. *Roseanne* shows that financial troubles are not necessarily a result of an inadequate work ethic. Unique in its portrayal of nuanced working-class folks, feminists, and gay people, the show won multiple awards and stayed in its network primetime spot for the nine seasons it ran.

More importantly, and relevant to this project, is the show's kindness towards fat people and its own fat characters. As I mentioned previously, there has always been a place for the fat body in the working class. Sturdy bodies are better for labor, and both Dan and Roseanne are physical laborers at various points during the series. They are always cash-strapped; their lower-classness is a focal point of the show. Williams says, in *The Guardian*,

> Sometimes you can only see the taboo when it breaks: decent people are not supposed to be skint [broke]; nice families are not supposed to ever think about money, the way heroes of novels never have jobs. Having to haggle with your boss and have your pay docked, to get to a meeting at your kid's school? This stuff didn't happen to decent sitcom families before Roseanne, and it hasn't really happened since. (Williams 2017)

The Conners' working-class status was not just a backdrop for the program. Their money-related problems were often highlighted in story arcs and dialogue; like people who are actually poor or broke, the Conners talked about it all the time, and worried about it all the time.

Perhaps, however, it is easier to culturally reckon with fatness when the fat people are also poor. Because, as I explained above, popular wisdom places fatness and poverty

in a similar category in that they are both considered moral failings, results of the individual who has a poor work ethic (never, of course, a result of systemic and structural issues), so it may be that it makes more sense to the viewing public that one would be poor and fat at the same time. For example, the TLC network's reality television program *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which aired from 2012-2014 and featured a so-called "redneck" family from Georgia (see image below), many of whom were fat, including a young girl, Honey Boo Boo herself, who was also featured on the reality show *Toddlers and Tiaras*.

Figure 5.4 The “Honey Boo-Boo” family

Although there was much hand-wringing regarding and condescension surrounding the fatness of the people on *Honey Boo Boo*, especially in respect to the child, it seemed to make sense that "redneck" culture and fatness would be presented hand-in-hand, since both conditions are a result of a lax work ethic.

Since *Honey Boo Boo* ended, a follow-up show called *Mana June: From Not to Hot* was picked up and follows Alana's (Honey Boo Boo's) mother, June Shannon, and her dramatic weight-loss (see image below).

Figure 5.5 Mama June, post makeover

Now, since she is wealthier and has gained celebrity status, it seems that being fat is no longer as acceptable. It seems fat women who are coded as "salt of the earth,"- laborers and factory workers, real "working-class" women, like the character Roseanne - are much more culturally readable, even if not ideal. This in contrast to historical precedent in which fatness was a marker of wealth (Farrell 2011, 32.) Increasingly, in the 20th and 21st centuries, thinness has become a signifier of higher socioeconomic status. Current "common sense" dictates that one can be thin and rich if we just work hard and want it bad enough, although studies show that this is not necessarily true (see Ehrenreich, Lyons, Gaesser).

5.2 Normalizing Fat Ridicule

Aside from *Roseanne*, there are not many television shows which feature fat characters, in love, as the focal point. One that did, *Mike and Molly,* ran for six seasons on CBS and featured Billy Gardell and Melissa McCarthy as the eponymous characters (see image below).

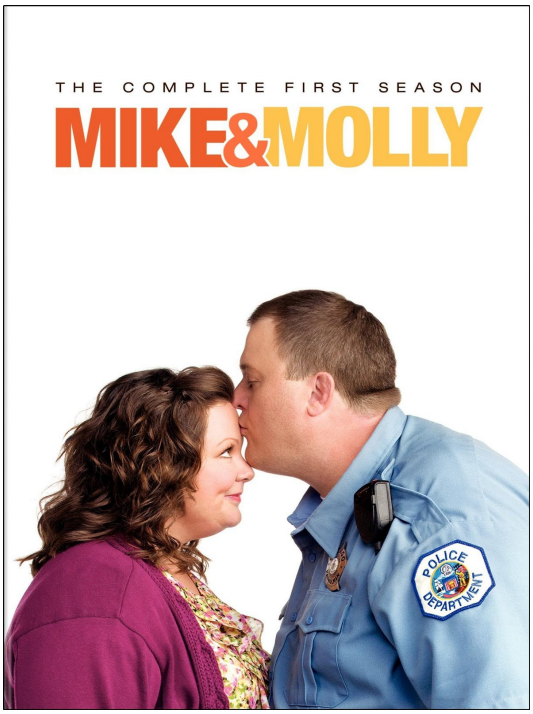

Figure 5.6 Mike and Molly

The series begins when the two meet at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting and fall in love. Mike (Gardell) is a policeman in Chicago and Molly (McCarthy) is a grade school teacher. It's a standard sitcom and even features the same set that *Roseanne* was shot on during the 1980s and 90s[59].

I wonder if *Mike and Molly* tried to build on the legacy of *Roseanne*; in season four, Molly tries to become a writer, just like Roseanne did. If the show does try to stand on *Roseanne*'s shoulders, it wobbles mightily. I knew I had to watch *Mike and Molly* for

[59] http://www.cbs.com/recommended-galleries/1003798/33-great-easter-eggs-you-may-have-missed/79095/roseanne-s-set-mike-molly/

this project. It stands out as one of the only mainstream, popular television shows with two fat characters front and center. But something in me resisted. I put it off and put it off until I could put it off no longer. I'd seen bits and pieces of the show, here and there, and the clumsy, bumbling fatty-on-TV routine was just too much for me.

In this show, McCarthy is the leading woman; there is something to be said for that. We, as fat women, are so seldom allowed to be the leading lady; there is usually a thinner, "hotter" woman to focus on. But I still cannot shake the uncomfortable feeling I have when I watch *Mike and Molly.* McCarthy is wonderful and hilarious, as usual, but as I watched, the entire time I was thinking: this is so beneath her. She is so funny and brilliant, and this show is so ridden with stereotypes and one-dimensional character development that I find it unfortunate she is associated with the program.

The *Mike and Molly* writers are obviously so focused on the fatness of the two main characters that it seems like everything else about them is secondary. Some of this comes from real life - the world certainly looks at me and other fat people and sees fat first and everything else second, third, or fifty-first. But the fat characters on *Mike and Molly* are so defined by their fat, everything in their lives seems to hinge on their bodies. The couple meets at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting in the first episode, so their fatness is a main centerpiece of the story, and their bond, right away. Not only is fatness centered by this plot point, but it is also positioned as something they both are unhappy about and trying to change. Again, this is not uncommon. However, their bodies are constantly referenced, prodded at, and ridiculed. The barrage of fat jokes is relentless. The most mean-spirited of the jokes are lobbed at Mike by his policeman partner, Carl (played by Reno Wilson), a black man who lives with his grandmother.

Carl is constantly ridiculing Mike for his fatness, and Mike, who is kind, gentle, and soft-spoken, rarely jabs back. He just sighs and takes it. Carl says things to Mike like "you may never have sex without paying for it" all while Mike seems to adopt an attitude of long-suffering martyrdom in respect to his relationship with Carl. Mike is a constant target for ridicule, and he seems accustomed, even resigned to it. It is depressing to watch this character plod through life, expecting the people closest to him be the most cruel about his body. He is always the butt of the joke. Even though his body is onscreen much of the time, and he is a main character, with trials and tribulations like anyone else, Mike's body is still positioned as a problem. Perhaps a normal problem, but a problem nonetheless.

Molly does not appear to get the same treatment as Mike. Her weight is constantly referenced, but the other characters are kinder towards her than they are to Mike. But her big body is front-and-center, physically and discursively, from the very first minute she appears on-screen. She is first shown on a treadmill, singing *Brick House* (surely a reference to her size), in her living room. Her thin mother (played by Swoozie Kurtz) comes into the room and asks her, assumedly in reference to her exercising: "Why are you doing this to yourself?" She tells Molly that she was always "a big-boned girl" so as to assumedly soothe Molly and stop her from exercising so much. Her mother is also eating a large piece of chocolate cake, and raving about how good it is, to Molly's dismay.

Molly's sister, party-girl Victoria (played by Katy Mixon) joins in, and says she just wants to try to help Molly "get laid." We witness the assumption here that Molly cannot get a man for herself, and needs her sister's help. Victoria is positioned as the "hot

one"; she is beautiful but dumb and often stoned. She has problems with drugs and is attracted to the worst kind of men, seemingly addicted to the drama of it. Molly's mother is usually shown with a glass of wine in her hand. Between the three women, it is evident they all have problems with impulse control and overconsumption - Molly eats too much, her sister loves getting high, and her mom is always drinking. All three are positioned as problematic and codependent.

Interestingly, it appears as though Molly's type of overconsumption is positioned as the worst of the three, while the others are just whimsical and funny. After a back and forth battle between the three about Molly's mom and sister eating chocolate cake in front of her while she is dieting, Molly storms out. Her mother then turns to her sister and says: "Why don't you take her to one of those lesbo clubs? They seem to like the beefy gals." Cue giant laugh track. So in addition to Molly not being able to get a keep a man, her mother suggests lesbianism as a cure for her problems, assuming that lesbian women will like Molly's body type more than straight men. Not to mention the antiquated and condescending use of the word "lesbo."

All of this is in the first episode! The program is loaded with condescending stereotypes about fat people and their love lives, personal tribulations, and interactions with the world. This is not to deny that many fat people feel defined and boxed-in by their fatness and the associations we make about those with fat bodies. But to have these, often painful, experiences put on television as fodder for joke after joke, jab after jab? Making fat-jokes a central narrative trope may represent something real in fat people's lives, but it has less the effect of normalizing those lives than normalizing the ridicule: the fat jokes and fat degradation, not fat people themselves. A study in *The Journal of*

Entertainment and Media Studies found that "Nearly one out of every five jokes made in *Mike and Molly* were about weight or body image...[and]...these findings suggest that *Mike and Molly* is not a show about two people dating, but pointedly a show about a show about two *overweight* people dating." (Nichols, et al, 2015, 118-9) The authors continue, "Instead of 'normalizing' these overweight characters, it is possible that *Mike and Molly* only serves to reinforce negative beliefs in its audience members." (Nichols, et al, 2015, 120) I think shows like this make it okay to constantly jab at that fat uncle or cousin, as if it it were not okay before.

Mike's passivity in the face of degrading jokes from his so-called friends exhibits a bleak surrender fat folks sometimes must perform in order to exist publicly in the world. To normalize these attitudes is cruel and unkind, in my reading - nothing to be laughed at or celebrated. Nichols, et al, say in their study, "By using a multitude of fat jokes, the sweetly subversive premise of the program gets lost in sea of slapstick fat, gay, and race gags that often dominate television." (Nichols, et al 2015, 103) The possibility for subversiveness in *Mike and Molly* is important to mention, as these scholars do. It's rare that we see fat characters on television, working, living and loving. *Mike and Molly* could be that, if the writers were not so insistent on insulting their main characters.

In an interesting moment during Mike and Molly's courtship, Molly thanks Mike for "being such a gentleman" and he responds by saying, "You're a lady, you deserve it." It is rare for fat women to get this kind of treatment from men on TV, as in real life, in which we are often treated as an unruly "other," undeserving of "lady" status. This, as the authors say, is a "sweetly subversive" moment, as well as a normalizing moment for fat women in terms of courtship and dating. To be a real "lady" is not something to which we

usually have access. Of course—as I noted in the first section of this chapter—the fact that “lady” strikes us as so unusual is also a reminder of how anomalous such a moment is. Additionally, Mike supports Molly later in the series when she quits her job as a teacher and becomes an erotica author (this development could put Molly in the hypersexual fat woman category, even though she herself is not especially hypersexed in her personal life). Unfortunately, these moments are drowned out by all of the fat jokes and cruel treatment of fat characters. Visibility is important. However, as we can see in any number of examples, visibility alone, when falling back on stereotypes and insults as ways to frame these fat characters, does not serve fat people in the end.

Comparing *Mike and Molly* to *Roseanne* shows the stark contrast between normalizing representation and negative, demeaning, marginalizing representation. The same can be said about *This is Us*, the tearjerker NBC primetime drama which features Chrissy Metz as Kate. Metz does not fit the traditional mold of acceptable, "hourglass"-shaped fat women (Dionne 2017), and her presence on primetime TV is noticeable and important. During the recent season finale, Kate even has a beautiful wedding to her fiance, Toby—a seeming contrast to the “lonely, unloved fat girl” archetype discussed in chapter three, and a rare and welcome change from the tragic and ridiculous stories often told about fat women’s love lives. I was surprised as I watched the finale with my mom (it's one of her favorite shows, and she thinks Chrissy is "delightful"). Fat women are rarely represented as happy and in reciprocated love, and Kate's wedding subverts the narrative and could offer some hope to fat women watching the show.

However, the wedding “moment” has to compete with much that is more typical of fat girl narratives. For *Bitch* magazine, Evette Dionne writes

> [Kate] meets Toby [her fiancee] in a fictional version of Overeaters Anonymous, a group she joins to gain better control over her nutrition while she contemplates bariatric surgery. In nearly every scene, Toby and Kate are agonizing over their diet and their scale number. Should they order dessert? Will losing weight create a chasm between them? There's no consideration of how romantic relationships form in the honeymoon phase. Where's the sex, the romance, and the passion? Are fat people not entitled to a happiness borne from a functional, healthy relationship?

Again, like in *Mike and Molly*, the hyper-focus on fatness leaves little room for the characters to love, live, have sex, and be human with one another. Why can't we fat girls just have a regular, ordinary love story, without constant jokes at our expense, and minus the tragedy? Dionne continues,

> Yes, fat women are often told that we're unworthy of being desired, pleasured, or loved, so when someone is romantically interested in us, there's some skepticism. Yes, we often have fraught relationships with our families who've tried to peddle "healthier" lifestyles to us by restricting our food intake, making untoward comments about our bodies, and helping us internalize that our bodies must be changed to be loved. Yes, we're often pigeonholed into the role of nurturer within our families, our friend groups, and our relationships. But how can we ever envision ourselves differently if we're only seeing one reflection in our personal lives, in media, and in our institutions?

Such is the power of popular representations. It is very difficult to have a healthy, happy life when all you see reflected back in the mirror is sadness or demeaning jokes. Metz's presence on primetime television should be celebrated, certainly, but do these representations of fat girl abjection help or hurt us? Hopefully, the writers of shows like these will continue to consider ways to complicate their fat characters, and offer them new and more varied storylines. Fat girls can be in love. It is a possibility, and I am living it. But I was trekking on my own, in the darkness. I want to provide some light for people like me, and TV writers have the power to make this happen.

Kate's beautiful wedding was definitely a start, especially when we consider the ways fat people are often featured on TV (for example: *My 600 Pound Life* or *The Biggest Loser*.) But why must we purchase these positive moments with incessant fat

jokes or gross eating scenes? Do the writers harbor an unconscious belief that all fat people (including, perhaps, themselves) deserve to be mocked for their eating habits and size? Or is it simply that in the end, they know that laughter at the expense of fat people remains one of the few forms of "politically incorrect," ratings-generating behavior that is still acceptable to the vast majority of viewers?

5.3 "Looking Past" the Fat: Attempted Normalization via Fat-Blindness

Another flawed attempt at normalization for fat people is the kind of representation which encourages us to "look past" peoples' fatness and see the "true" person inside. One example of this representation is *Shallow Hal,* featuring Jack Black and Gwyneth Paltrow and released in 2001, which chronicles the dating mishaps of Black's Hal (see image below).

Figure 5.7 Jack Black (right) in Shallow Hal

On his deathbed, Hal's father (while hopped up on morphine) advises the young Hal that the best thing in life is "hot young tail," traumatizing Hal and creating the superficial

adult he will become. Hal, when he grows up, is only interested in the "hottest" women, despite being chubby and goofy himself. His friends try to convince him to look beyond women's physical appearances, telling him, "you're not that good looking," which he shrugs off.

Serendipitously, he encounters a self-help guru in a broken elevator, and is semi-hypnotized to only see the "true," inner beauty of the women around him. What ensues is a strange attempt "a modern-day parable about inner beauty" (Mendoza). Hal, from then on, only sees the "inner beauty" of the women he encounters, although he thinks he is seeing them as the rest of the world sees them. He thinks the guru made "it easier for him to score with the ladies," even though it is his own perception that has changed. His friends are confused by the new Hal, wondering why he has gone from shallow to seeing beyond appearances so abruptly.

Like with *Mike and Molly,* I dreaded watching *Shallow Hal.* As my husband loaded the library DVD into the player and we settled in to watch, I joked that I had successfully avoided the film for 16 years. Although the film seems to aim for some lofty, high-minded morality in which we are encouraged to look for one's "inner beauty" and stop being so judgmental about people's appearances, I walked away with another message: in order for fat girls to be loved, we have to trick people into loving us. Hal actually has to be hypnotized by the self-help guru to even approach a woman he doesn't consider attractive.

Further, the "ugly" women with whom Hal finds company are barely shown on-screen. Rosemary, Hal's love interest, is played by Gwyneth Paltrow, who takes up much of the character's screen time. This despite the "real" Rosemary being very fat, and

Paltrow representing Rosemary's "inner" beauty. We only see slips and glances of the "real" Rosemary, sometimes accompanied by horror-movie music as well as insults from people around her, assumedly in order to procure laughs from the audience.

The horror of the "real" Rosemary does not deserve actual on-screen visibility, further contributing the to marginalization of her fat body. Katharina R Mendoza, in *The Fat Studies Reader,* says, "The film *does* intermittently remind the audience of Fat Rosie's existence, but she is not a person in the sense that Skinny Rosie is; she is only pieces of a fat body, made available to viewers mostly in chopped-up, fetishized chunks." (Mendoza) The film encourages its viewers, via Hal, to "look beyond" appearances, but only because we can look at Paltrow instead of a fat woman in the meantime.

The "real," fat Rosemary only gets a few minutes of full-body screen time at the end of the film, and is played by Paltrow in a fat suit, not an actual fat actress. Mendoza continues, "The film indulges in numerous close-ups of cellulite-rippled arms, thighs, and buttocks, but it is not until after Hal's hypnosis is lifted that the audience ever sees Fat Rosie's face." (Mendoza) Hal may be falling in love with Rosie's personality, but he also falls in love with thin Rosie's (Paltrow's) body. I wondered, as I watched, what does Hal feel when he touches Rosie? It seems, as they kiss and touch and eventually have sex, that he is touching Paltrow's body, not a fat body. He then is horrified when Rosie's "true" self is revealed (although one wonders what he thought was happening as Rosie breaks chairs by sitting in them, causes a massive cannonball splash at the pool, even creating enough force to send a kid flying from the pool into a tall tree above), and takes days to reckon with his feelings and affections for such an (apparently) unlovable monstrosity.

Shallow Hal positions fat women's bodies as something to "look past," an unfortunate circumstance to be overcome. Additionally, the viewer, and Hal, see segmented pieces of Rosie's fat body so that it is easier, and more palatable, to deal with. Mendoza says,

> By the end of the film [when Hal decides to live happily ever after with Rosie, after days of agonizing self-interrogation], all the nuances of character - even those behaviors coded as 'fat' - have been vacated from Fat Rosie assigned to her thin self; Fat Rosie has become superfluous. Broken into pieces, fat is removed from her body in an illusion of detachable weight; it is almost as if we are cracking open a false outer shell, revealing a whole, thin body fully invested with personality, movement, and agency, unburdened by fat. (Mendoza)

Aside from the gags and goofs relying on Rosie's fatness for laughs, Rosie's fatness is "vacated" as we see how beautiful, caring, and kind she is on the inside. We might laugh at Rosie downing two milkshakes in one, uninterrupted gulp (how? why?), but we know that the "real" Rosie is as beautiful as Paltrow on the inside.

We are still meant to laugh at Rosie's body and the things it does, all while being spared the apparent horror of actually having to look at a fat woman's body for a few hours. When Hal and Rosie have sex, we are spared the sight of Fat Rosie in lingerie, or Fat Rosie naked. We see Paltrow in a skimpy negligee and when Rosie takes her underwear off and tosses it to Hal in a moment of abandon, in sort of a striptease, we see her extra-large undies (again, what does Hal think is happening here?) and are meant to laugh at the size of her undergarments, but we never have to deal with Rosie's fat, sexual body in a substantial way.

> [T]he fat body is telling absent from the lighthearted striptease moment, in which Skinny Rosie, and only skinny Rosie, peels off a purple negligee set. The audience, we can only assume, heaves a collective sigh of relief at being spared the sight of Fat Rosie's naked body. Ultimately, the film's supposed endorsement of Rosemary as a valid love interest hinges on the thin, inner, real self inside her fat body. (Mendoza)

Clearly Hal would have never considered being with a woman like Rosie without hypnosis and trickery.

Rosie is only lovable because she is Paltrow on the inside. She is not lovable as herself. Mendoza continues, "The film's happy ending is...suspect: if Hal had not been under the 'inner beauty' hypnosis when he first met Rosie, he would have never fallen in love with her." The film confirms what many people seem to think: fat women cannot be loved for their bodies, they can only be loved *in spite of* their bodies. This message is one I received as a young girl, and one that most fat girls and women can likely relate to. *Shallow Hal,* despite what it may have been aiming for, only reaffirms this position.

The flimsy morality of the film, the message that we should see inner beauty and be less concerned with outer beauty, is canceled out by the directorial decision to objectify Fat Rosie throughout. By positioning *women's* fat (remember: Jack Black is no beanpole himself) as so abhorrent that it can barely be shown on screen, and that which requires Paltrow as a proxy, fatness is further stigmatized.

Could a film like *Shallow Hal* be made today? Or have our cultural attitudes about fat changed enough so that the film would not draw large audiences? It seems that social media has provided more opportunities to write about and discuss anti-fat ideologies, which can contribute to changing cultural ideas about fatness. *The Fat Studies Reader* came out in 2009, Amy Farrell's *Fat Shame* came out in 2011, and there is certainly a space for fat women in today's television and film[60]. Fat suits seem to be on the way out. I remember when Tyra Banks wore a fat suit to try and show all of the ways fat women

[60] for example, Gabourey Sidibe, Melissa McCarthy, Rebel Wilson, and the other women I've discussed in this project.

are treated badly. This did not go over well, and was mostly considered to be an insensitive gesture[61]. Kathleen LeBesco, in her 2008 article comparing fat suits and blackface, says,

> Fatness is increasingly appropriated as a dramatic theme and rendered without fat actors - instead, we see thin actors in fat suits. And both decisions - to represent black or fat bodies without using actual black or fat actors - reflect their historical eras, marked by imagined fears of contamination from racial integration and the seemingly contagious obesity epidemic. (LeBesco 2008, 234-5)

While ideas about the danger of the "obesity epidemic" are still going strong, it seems that fat suits are not. Further, it seems that online "call-out culture[62]" (using social media as a way to highlight "problematic" cultural products and the online pile-on that often happens as a result) might give some movie writers and studios pause before they throw a skinny woman in a fat suit and make a ton of fat jokes about her. What would an updated version of *Shallow Hal* look like, in 2018 (or beyond)? At the very least, it would likely have an actual fat woman in it, which is better or worse, depending on how you look at it.

A twist on *Shallow Hal*'s themes is the program *Drop Dead Diva,* a fictional series in which a thin, vapid woman dies, and when she approaches the entrance to heaven, she is deemed a "zero-zero," having performed zero good deeds but not having done anything especially bad, either. She sends herself back to Earth only to find herself in the body of a plus-size do-gooder lawyer. The shallow, vapid thin woman thus learns about selfless living via her new plus-sized life. This program does give some visibility to bigger woman - comedian Margaret Cho is also featured from time to time - and is a

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[61] see http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2005-11-07/news/0511070257_1_tyra-banks-show-fat-suit-overweight-women

[62] see https://www.chronicle.com/article/Academe-s-Poisonous-Call-Out/240016

generally positive representation for bigger women. Jane (the plus-sized lawyer) is successful, intelligent, motivated, and caring.

Superficial Deb, who inhabits Jane's body, is none of these things but learns the value of these virtues as she inhabits Jane's body. It's a feel-good show about "looking past" appearances to see one's character underneath. But again, it feels somewhat empty, considering what it is promoting. In order for Deb to have compassion for Jane, she literally has to inhabit her skin. Actual Jane is dead, sacrificed so Deb can learn important life lessons. Clearly this is not a representation of "real life" but shows that advocate "looking past" one's appearance to see the "true beauty" on the inside often leave me wanting more. Why do we have to go through these narrative gymnastics in order to have empathy for fat people? And why does fat itself negate possibility for sex appeal? Similar questions arise in respect to both *Drop Dead Diva* and *Shallow Hal.*

5.4 Fatness is Not Our Only Story: New Ways of Representing Fat Girls

In the Netflix series *Easy,* season 2, episode 6 features Danielle Macdonald (see image below) as Grace, a child of privilege who rebels against her family by taking her trust fund and giving it to her local church as a response to her parents forcing her to attend mass.

Figure 5.8 Danielle Macdonald

Interestingly, Grace is fat, and no one (in the world of the show) seems to mind. Her parents, friends, and boyfriend are thin, and no one even mentions her weight during the episode. The plot revolves around Grace finding herself, intellectually and spiritually, a journey not often permitted in stories about fat girls. For the most part, we are either talked about in a condescending and distancing ways, or, our entire narrative revolves around our bodies. For Grace, the story is different. She has a relatively calm and happy, privileged life, and is just trying to find herself like any other teenager.

The episode opens with Grace showing her intellectual chops in her high school class as they discuss Nazism and fascism. It is also evident immediately that Grace is popular, as well as intellectually sharp. She is always surrounded by her boyfriend and other friends. She gets in trouble with her permissive, wealthy parents when she brings

her boyfriend home one day after school and they are caught by her father making out and getting naked in her bedroom. Once she is caught in the act, her parents discuss with one another how they thought she was being so good, not having sex and getting good grades, and how they thought they were going to escape having to deal with a difficult teenager. As a punishment, they demand that she come to church with them every Sunday until she leaves for college. This sets the stage for Grace's spiritual and intellectual journey throughout the remainder of the episode.

There are a few unique elements at work in this episode. One, not only does everyone accept Grace without reference to her body, in addition, there is no fat talk from anyone else in the show. Unlike *Parks and Recreation,* which I will analyze in the next section, in which a fat woman character is accepted by her peers but there are always anti-fat attitudes swirling around in the background of the story, Grace's world seems just fine with her body and maybe even fat bodies in general. Two, Grace's mother (played by Judy Greer), explicitly tells Grace that she does not want her to feel bad for being sexual with her boyfriend. Her parents tell Grace that they are looking for honesty from her, and are not trying to make her feel guilty about having sexual feelings and impulses. Three, it is remarkable to see a teenaged fat girl character represented like Grace. Not only is everyone around her fine with her body - her boyfriend is clearly attracted to her, her parents love and support her, and she is popular at school - but also Grace is incredibly confident and self-assured. She is going through a time of transformation and self-exploration, but she is not self-hating. She is just trying to figure out what she thinks and what she stands for. I've never seen anything even remotely like this episode. It gives me hope for all us fat girls and our futures.

However, not everyone is pleased with this kind of representation. As I was researching for information related to the episode, and for viewer response, I came upon a comment thread on the website Reddit, a popular site in which users can comment on cultural artifacts. The first comment on the thread about this episode says, "I hated this episode...How did she get so fat? Her mother and father seem to be eating healthy. Her having a normal boyfriend and being so popular is not realistic. Sorry. It's not a PC thing." (Reddit user) These kinds of comments continue, as another user says, "the daughter was obese yet seemed very popular and even had a skinny boyfriend - totally unrealistic! A girl that overweight would likely either be stuck with a big fat white guy or a black guy." Another user proclaims, "I want to know the reason for having a fat girl in there too, the situations weren't very realistic, in real life a girl like her wouldn't be one of the popular ones or have a boyfriend like that." Yet another user says, "nice to see a fat girl casted w/out it being a fat story, the downside is that you have to *see* a fat girl." Another explains, "Haha glad I'm not the only one. Really grossed me out seeing her normal healthy sized boyfriend make out with her in bed, and all her friends in high school act like she was one of the super popular ones. Honestly so unrealistic. Completely ruined any immersion in the episode because none of that would happen in real life."

These were not the only kinds of comments about the episode, however. On the same Reddit page, a user says in response to the negative comments about MacDonald and her body,

> I'm so irked by all these comments about how her weight was unrealistic and that she couldn't possibly be cool or liked by a skinny boy. I'm about her size and I've dated boys that skinny, I've also dated guys my size and I like them both and

> guess what... the skinny guys liked my body despite it being “gross”! I know, it’s shocking! So all you men complaining about having to watch a big girl, good luck getting anyone to have sex with you.

To add, another user says, "Also, not sure why the hate for Grace being overweight. People of all weights live full lives with many different narratives. I didn't interpret this as anything other than this specific family's story and the daughter happened to be overweight. I thought it was refreshing to not be a story about weight." In the comments section for the show on the website tvtime.com, a user echoes this sentiment and says, "So this episode was about a fat girl but it was never, not even for a second, about her weight! THANK YOU Easy! Everytime its a fat or just a little heavy girl it’s about the weight and confidence! Just because you cary (sic) some extra fat doesent (sic) mean your whole life revolves around your weight!" Combining the ideas in these comments (on tvtime.com) user Sonja says, "They [Grace and her skinny boyfriend] are super cute. It was so refreshing to see a fat girl dating a skinny guy for once! And their relationship/her weight wasn’t a plot point. That just NEVER happens in mainstream media. Thank you! This episode was just great overall." The comments that were more positive about Grace and her size emphasized the importance of showing a fat girl on-screen and having her story arc focus on something other than her body. While the negative online comments about Grace focus almost exclusively on her body - and how unlikely it was that she could be loved and admired by her boyfriend, friends, and family at that weight - the lack of attention to her body is what seemed to please those who seemed to enjoy this kind of representation.

This speaks to a complicated situation in including more fat people in popular culture representations: should the fat body be a point of reference? In what way? For

many of us, our fatness *does* define us in uncomfortable and often unwelcome ways. But in the process of attempting to normalize the fat body, is it better not to mention it at all? Perhaps should we just act as if there is no difference between Grace and a thin girl-character? Does ignoring the fat body, but including it on-screen and in other forms of mainstream representation help make things better for fat women? There seems to be a fine line between positive representation and blindness to the reality of living in a fat woman's body. As with race and class, ignoring material reality, even as an attempt at equality, can erase the particular struggles marginalized people face. For example, in her book *The New Jim Crow,* Michelle Alexander discusses the problems with "colorblindness" as a guiding principle in US civil rights discourse. She says, "

> Our blindness...prevents us from seeing the racial and structural divisions that persist in society: the segregated, unequal schools, the segregated, jobless ghettos, the segregated public discourse - a public conversation that excludes the current pariah caste. Our commitment to colorblindness extends beyond individuals to institutions and social arrangements. (Alexander 2010, 241)

This blindness to material reality, what one can empirically observe, as well as to physical difference, does not seem to help marginalized people as they seek equality. Instead, it becomes an excuse to ignore the challenges particular groups face, and can be used as a way to blame them when they do not succeed. But, of course, we can all see when someone is fat, or black. Purported "blindness" does not change prejudice and bias that is deeply interwoven in our social and political systems.

Still, I can't help but wonder what this episode could mean to a fat teenage girl. Just seeing a story focus on the emotional and spiritual growth of a fat teenage girl, instead of on her body, could open up new possibilities for young women and their sense of what they can be. In part because of popular representations I chronicled in this

project, I never thought I could have a story like Grace's. However, the above (negative) comments speak to some of the challenges that come with normalizing fat women's bodies. For one, some people still do not want to see fat bodies in their entertainment. Additionally, it is difficult for some viewers to see past a fat actor's body and focus on the story. Fatness then becomes central to the experience of watching the show even if it is not central to the plot. Normalized on-screen representation thus is only one piece in the puzzle of a more general, widespread fat acceptance, because of viewer reaction and response. Additionally, if the sight of a fat body makes people turn off their screens, producers and writers may be less likely to cast a fat person in the future. But, for now, at least we can be thankful for small victories.

5.5 Fat Girl Fantasies

Sometimes representational normalization of fat women's bodies comes in the form of wish fulfillment, or what I'm calling "fat girl fantasies." What I meant by this is: representations of this type seems to bear little resemblance to the world I know. However, they serve as a beacon, a light at the end of the tunnel, an alternate world in which to escape the harsh reality of living as a fat girl. One of these representations is *Hairspray,* the film by John Waters, which has been adapted into several iterations, including a Broadway play.

I would love to live in the universe John Waters created in *Hairspray.* In it, we witness a world in which fat-acceptance and activism for racial equality are held up as the gold standards by which everyone should live. Misfit Tracy Turnblad (see image below),

fat girl extraordinaire, fights for cultural acceptance of her black friends, her own fat body, and dances her way to true love and local fame.

Figure 5.9 Tracy in Hairspray

Waters achieved countercultural fame by using camp and gay subcultural elements in his films. (Woodward 2012) *Hairspray* is remarkable because Tracy, played by Ricki Lake in the 1988 original film, is one of the few film or television characters who has a fat body and people seem to be mostly unbothered by it. Tracy is generally beloved and supported by her community, with only a few exceptions.

Tracy's teenage nemesis, Amber Von Tussle, and Amber's parents, played by Sonny Bono and Debbie Harry, are the only people who seem to care about Tracy's fat body. Amber calls Tracy "fatso" and "whore", wonders aloud if Tracy is "a little fat for the [local dance competition] show" calls her "thunder thighs" and a "fat retard," but we are not meant to side with Amber and her family. We are clearly supposed to condemn their hateful ideas and rhetoric. This is also evidenced by the Von Tussle family's

commitment to "whites only" segregation of the local dance competition and their family business. They are immediately positioned as villainous because of their attitudes towards people of color and fat people; their behavior is painted as at least misguided, if not all-out bigotry. The audience is meant to see their positions as contemptuous and intolerant, clearly not to be replicated or admired. Tracy is obviously the hero, radiating with confidence and sparkling with fat-girl shine.

The main conflict in the film does not center around Tracy's weight. It is mentioned by the Von Tussles (assumedly to show us what jerks they are) and by Tracy's mother Edna, played by Divine, who is also fat. Edna encourages Tracy to take her doctor-prescribed appetite suppressant at the beginning of the film, which Edna herself takes, seemingly in order to be more energetic more than for actual weight loss. But as the film progresses, Edna warms to fat-acceptance via her daughter's success.

After Tracy is on TV, dancing in the local American Bandstand-like program, she gets a sponsorship deal with the local plus-size clothing store for women. The shop owner hopes aloud, to Tracy and her mother, that "there's no diets in the works" and offers Tracy cute plus-size clothes as payment for advertising his store. Tracy is also one of the few fat girl characters who is styled well on-screen. Typically, we see fat girls and women in frumpy clothes, muumuus and sweatpants hiding their big bodies. But Tracy is styled well, and offers an alternative, fun-loving, self-confident femininity to the uptight, coiffed, skinny Amber. Tracy's body is not simply tolerated in *Hairspray*, it is celebrated.

Tracy, in addition to winning the hearts of Baltimore's residents via the dancing competition and her anti-segregation stance, also wins the heart of Amber's ex-boyfriend, Link. Link falls head over heels for Tracy after seeing her dance and after Amber is

punished for calling Tracy names. It is unclear, though, why everyone becomes so smitten with Tracy so quickly. I will happily live in this fat girl-loving universe any day, but the question nags at me: why is everyone so quick to condemn Amber's fat-hating comments? Why does Link love Tracy so easily? The film functions as wish-fulfillment for fat girls, an alternate universe in which fat-hating and body-bullying is quickly condemned, and where the fat body is no big deal; friends, family, and boyfriends alike are happy and willing to throw their support behind a fat girl.

We all know that "real life" is nothing like this, but in John Waters' world campy representations of altruistic anti-racist teenagers, along with fat-loving friends and boyfriends, we find relief from the real world and all of its inequality and unjust attitudes. In this world, Link falls in love with Tracy and everyone (besides Amber) thinks it's totally normal, perhaps even unremarkable. Waters gives us a window into a world where fat girls are pretty, cute, stylish and thriving.

The film shows us that "big is beautiful" and Edna even remarks that the dancing, stylish Tracy is "prettier than Elizabeth Taylor." No one balks at this; it seems quite ordinary in Waters' universe. Bigotry and hatred should be shunned and condemned, not fat girls themselves, as exemplified by the treatment of the Von Tussle family and others who are anti-integration. *Hairspray* was one of the first times I witnessed fat acceptance and fat celebration on-screen. I'd never seen a fat-girl hero, or even a fat girl who was not constantly ridiculed and put down. Waters gives us a queer, gay, fat-positive world that could be ours if we want it.

What makes *Hairspray* a fantasy, opposed to the episode of *Easy* I discussed earlier? The complete and unabashed love for Tracy and her body is what makes

Hairspray more like a fantasy world for fat girls. I can imagine a world in which people mostly ignore my body, but it is difficult to imagine a society that celebrates bodies like mine. While there are certainly pockets of society which celebrate fatness in various ways (chubby chaser parties, fat-positive communities), this is not a society-wide phenomenon.

John Waters makes it very clear who the "bad guys" are - and they are the ones who are making the fat jokes. Further, very little is required of Tracy to "prove" herself to the people around her. She dances, sure, and she is a nice and kind girl, but there seems to be this attitude among her supporters that Tracy can do no wrong. This, for a fat girl, is not representative of the world we live in. *Hairspray* itself is situated in a fantasy genre, wherein people spontaneously break into song and dance, and is a representation of the past - all of which work to influence our understanding of Tracy as not a "real" girl, but something of a caricature, or fantasy.

Fat girls are often treated badly for their size, but in addition, girls of all sizes are often made to feel bad, wrong, and stupid for all kinds of reasons relating to patriarchal attitudes. The (nearly) complete adoration of Tracy seems like it could exist sub-culturally at best, not in the mainstream. But perhaps I am just pessimistic. In contrast, Grace on *Easy* seems to be more dynamic, a person with flaws and inner struggles. Grace seems like a real teenager, one you would meet in person. Tracy is more one-dimensional - heroic, but less substantial in her character development. Grace reminds me of one of my students - frustrating, sarcastic, but doing her best to become an adult in a confusing world.

Another somewhat normalized fat woman representation is the story arc for supporting character Donna Meagle (see image below), played by actress Retta, in NBC's sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, which aired from 2009 - 2015.

Figure 5.10 Retta in Parks and Recreation (right)

Donna Meagle, in many ways, resembles the stereotype of the "strong, sassy" black woman[63], delivering caustic one-liners and "throwing shade" at those who cross her. Her story borders on complicated and multidimensional, but still often relies on the tired stereotypes of black women in the US. She and Tom Haverford, another parks worker played by Aziz Ansari, engage in a yearly ritual, called "Treat Yo Self", in which they appropriately treat themselves to "Clothes. Fragrances. Massages. Mimosas. Fine Leather Goods." Donna is also courted by many beautiful, successful men about town, and "plays the field" with ease. Donna is smart and performs well at her job, and always shocks the viewer with tidbits of her lavish lifestyle outside of work, as well as stories of her many suitors.

[63] see Melissa Harris-Perry's *Sister Citizen* for more on this trope

Donna's body is never mentioned explicitly by the characters around her. However, her fatness is juxtaposed with the incessant comments about the obesity plaguing the inhabitants of Pawnee, Indiana - the town where the show is set. *Parks and Recreation* is a warm, gentle show, especially in terms of what passed for comedy on network TV during this time (*Two and a Half Men, Mike and Molly, 30 Rock* - all of which rely on jabs and insults for humor), but the kindness ends when it comes to discussing the obese population of Pawnee. The near-constant mention of the size of the town's inhabitants is paired with ongoing efforts to reduce obesity by main character Leslie Knope (played by Amy Poehler) and her co-workers. A popular Pawnee slogan boasts that the town is "First in Friendship, Fourth in Obesity." The biggest business enterprise in Pawnee is "Sweetums", a "sweet treat" manufacturer that employs most of the town and seems hell-bent on making its citizenry fat. Donna's body is never the direct object of this discussion, despite the conversation remaining a backdrop of the series for most of its run.

Donna, in contrast to this fat-is-bad rhetoric, is a baller. She invests in the local nightclub and becomes part owner, drives luxury cars, and has men fawning over her (according to her - we rarely witness this onscreen). Little pieces of Donna's past come to light here and there and illuminate a wild and adventurous youth - for example, she was "kicked out of En Vogue" (to which she replies that she kicked all of *them* out, not the other way around), the band Pearl Jam apparently wrote an album about her and she came in ninth place in *Italy's Got Talent*. The little bits of Donna's past lives always make us wonder what else she has accomplished before coming to work at the little parks department with Leslie and the others.

But the contrast between relentless fat jokes and Donna's lavish lifestyle creates tension in the narrative. The viewer is encouraged to believe Donna, support her baller lifestyle, and be glad when she indulges in all life has to offer. But it does not quite make sense in the universe of *Parks and Recreation,* where fat people seem to be such a nuisance, or in our world, where fat people *are* considered a problem and where black women are discriminated against on a regular basis. Donna's confidence is admirable but confusing in a world where fat people are always the butt of the joke. In the world of the show, her weight is never mentioned, and her storyline is one of triumph and success.

Donna happily marries her "do-gooder teacher bae", played by the handsome (and thin) comedian Keegan Michael Key, and when we flash forward to the future during the series finale, the two are living in wedded bliss with Donna supporting them as a high-powered real estate broker in Seattle. She is clearly the breadwinner, and even donates some of her commission to fund after-school programming at her husband's school. The two go on extravagant vacations on her salary, and live in a beautiful, expensive-looking house. Her husband clearly adores her, and is sexually attracted to her, evidenced by his excitement as the two discuss "the little red thing" Donna will wear after they have dinner.

Because fat women are not often considered attractive and appealing in our real world, I think characters like Donne and Tracy give us an escape from the real world. No one seems to notice or care that they are fat, and they live happily ever after with few hurdles to overcome (at least in terms of their bodies). Their confidence seems at odds in a world which clearly hates fat women; this is especially true for Donna, who seems oblivious to the "obesity crisis" and the eliminationist rhetoric around her. Perhaps Donna

"gets away" with being fat because she is black, again relying on tired stereotypes of fat, sassy, big black women. Perhaps Tracy gets a residual "pass" as well, since she is friends with black people, supports them, and is in community with them.

However, it seems that John Waters created the *Hairspray* universe as an antidote to the straight world, a place where freaks, queers, and weirdos can thrive. *Parks and Recreation* has some of that, but also never fails to remind us what a problem fat people are. Donna, however, is positioned as somehow "above" all of the obesity rhetoric that floats around in the background of *Parks and Recreation.* Her success, her sex appeal, the ways she effortlessly moves through social and political situations - it all feels like a fantastic dream, considering the ways fat people are treated in "real" life. Donna is somehow able to rise above all of the negative associations made about fat people, which can sometimes seem impossible to those of us living in the real world.

5.6 Fat People as “Real”

Among the “compliments” paid to shows that feature fat characters is their “reality.” As I scrolled through the Amazon user-generated reviews for *Mike and Molly* I found a common thread. Many viewers, in their positive reviews of the show, used words like "real" and "genuine" in respect to the eponymous characters. For example, one commenter said:

> I'm sorry I just started watching this tv show this year in its 4th season. It is funny and has some very funny characters and it's nice to see a couple that truly look like "real people" instead of typical Hollywood. Melissa McCarthy is hilarious and is incredibly talented but other characters in this show help make this show very funny and make me laugh out loud. (Amazon review)

For this commenter, seeing someone fat on television feels more "real" than watching other shows, with thinner celebrities in the lead roles. This trend continues throughout the reviews for the show. Another viewer said:

> One of my favorite shows. Like The Middle and Modern Family - it gets its laughs - but from characters rooted in reality. You like them. They have heart. They're real. You'll recognize a lot of sitcom tropes - but done in a loving way with characters you care about. A wonderful cast - each shining in their roles. And hysterically funny. From the man who brought you Two And A Half Men (amongst others) - this one had me hook, line and funny bone from the first episode. (Amazon review)

In part, the perception of "realness" is a recognition of the gap that usually exists between the celebrity bodies that appear on television, movies, and in glossy magazines, and the bodies of viewers. As another commentator puts it: "This show is seriously funny. I especially like that the main characters are not Hollywood model perfect people; giving a realistic insight on real people." (Amazon review) Again, the "realness" of these scripted characters (and assumedly, their bodies) is of important relevance to these viewers, as is annoyance with Hollywood's standards for thinness. Another commenter praises the show and the network CBS for airing it, and says:

> It is nice to see a show using people who represent something other than the widely held and oversimplified images to which the "advertising" community in America feels we should aspire in everyday roles. As we all know, most of America is not shaped like a model (male or female) in a magazine. This show offers something in the opposite direction, has wit and humor and a cast of supporting role actors with a variety of body shapes; a nice mixture. Good for CBS & "Mike & Molly"!!! (Amazon review)

For these viewers, it seems that the "realness" of Mike and Molly's fat bodies serves as an antidote to the airbrushed, sculpted, and toned bodies that are often featured in film and

television. If it's true, as many statistics show[64], that more and more people are becoming "obese" (or at least bigger) it would make sense that fat bodies appear more "real" and "normal" than those that are trimmed and toned. And one doesn't need to be medically classified as obese in order to identify as "fat." As I discussed during the section on *Project Runway,* for women, "the average American woman is a size 14, and plus-sized women who wear 14 or larger (up to a size 34) account for 67 percent of the American female population" (Pipia 2015) Fat (or at least not rail-thin) women are the majority if not the norm, so it makes sense that viewers would consider Mike and Molly to be "real."

The perception of reality may also have an economic dimension. The "obesity crisis," studies have documented, is class-biased. Fast foods are cheaper than fresh food purchased at a health-food market, do not require time to prepare at the end of an exhausting day, and are loaded with sugar and fat. It could be said, then, that shows like *Mike and Molly* and *Roseanne,* despite their differences in content and messaging, actually do show how more "regular" people live (struggling to make ends meet; unable to devote huge chunks of time to perfecting their bodies) than shows without this kind of body diversity. J. Mobley, in *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* says of *Mike and Molly*:

> ...the characters are blue-collar. Mike is a cop, and Molly is a grammar school teacher, and both live in the suburbs of Chicago. Although the show does not directly address their socioeconomic demographic, the fatness of these blue-collar folks is a pointed contrast to similar romantic sitcoms such as *Everybody Loves*

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[64] The World Health Organization reported that in 2018 that "The worldwide prevalence of obesity nearly tripled between 1975 and 2016." See http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight

> *Raymond*, where the characters are blue-collar, but the actors portraying them are Hollywood slim. (Mobley 2014)

Even though socioeconomic class is not a focal point in *Mike and Molly*, like it is in *Roseanne*, it exists in the backdrop of the show. The two programs, then, perhaps owe some of their success to this "realness": showing that working-class, blue collar people often look more like a Melissa McCarthy or Roseanne Barr than a thin, Hollywood actor. Those of us who live and work in Midwestern towns and cities likely see more bodies like theirs around us than the bodies sold to us in "reality" television. This reflection of different realities, based on class and location, is something the Amazon comments speak to; it also likely contributed to the staying power of the original *Roseanne* and *Mike and Molly.*

But the perception of "reality" may also have to do, ironically, with stereotypes rather than statistics or economics. Until The Cosby Show, it was standard fare to portray all black people as living in the "ghetto" or at best "moving on up" like the Jefferson's Depicting a black family as solidly upper-middle class, with a lawyer-mom and doctor-dad, was a breakthrough in the representation of the black family that was welcomed by many, while derided by others. Those who welcomed the show were thrilled at the popularity of a show that challenged the stereotypes embodied in previous representations, while those who were angered at the show railed at its "lack of realism" about black life—much as annoyed viewers of the "Easy" episode complained that no fat girl could possibly have a boyfriend like Grace's. The perception of a show like "Roseanne" as "real," similarly, may have to do with long-standing associations of the fat body, the working-class body, and the unruly body rather than (or in addition to) any sociological "reality" depicted.

5.7 Can Fat Women Be Fashionable?

During season fourteen of the reality show *Project Runway,* designer Ashley Nell Tipton competed with other clothing designers to win a chance at creating their own clothing line[65]. Tipton won the competition, and was the first plus-sized woman to create plus-sized clothes during the competition[66]. In "The Push for Plus: How a Small Part of the Fashion Industry Hopes to Make Big Changes to the Plus-Size Women's Fashion Market" Alexa Pipia explains,

> The winner of this season's *Project Runway*'s, Ashley Nell Tipton, featured her first plus-size women's collection in Full Figured Fashion Week in 2012. Tipton, a 24-year-old from San Diego, is a plus-sized woman herself, and wants to design more clothing for others like herself. Her goal is to create fun, vibrant fashion for plus-size women in their twenties and thirties. It took 14 seasons for the reality show to finally feature a plus-size designer, and when they did, she won. (Pipia 2015)

The hosts of the show, fashion guru Tim Gunn and model Heidi Klum, encouraged Tipton to make plus-sized clothing for the finale of the season, in which contestants create a limited clothing collection for New York Fashion Week[67]. Tipton, Gunn, and Tipton's family were featured in the season finale discussing the magnitude of her position, and the potential for her to make clothing for women who do not look like typical runway models. During most of the season of *Runway*, Tipton designed clothing

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[65] See also my discussion of consumer culture for more on plus-size clothing and capitalism, as well as some discussion of Tipton's reported recent weight-loss surgery.

[66] see https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2016/04/11/first-look-project-runways-ashley-nell-tipton-brings-plus-sized-style-jcpenney/82759122/

[67] see *Project Runway, Finale,* Part 1

for the typical, super-thin models, but then was offered the chance to design plus-sized clothing for the season finale.

Fat women are often unable to find clothing that will fit them. Alexa Pipia says, "According to research done by the Plunkett Research Group in 2014, the average American woman is a size 14, and plus-sized women who wear 14 or larger (up to a size 34) account for 67 percent of the American female population." (Pipia 2015) Typically, high fashion - the kind usually featured on *Project Runway* and on fashion runways generally - features clothing for rail-thin women with very little body fat. Pipia continues, "plus-size clothing only accounts for 15 percent of overall women's clothing sales. How is it that 67 percent of U.S. women have no chance of trying on 85 percent of the clothing sold in the country?" (Pipia 2015) The fashion industry is historically exclusive, and seems to be mostly uninterested in including fat women as designers or models. Pipia explains,

> [Designer] Karl Lagerfeld famously told the French television show Le Grand 8 in 2009, "No one wants to see curvy women on the runway." He took a lot of criticism for this comment, but clearly he was expressing a truism in the industry. Even now, year after year, high fashion designers feature size 0 and size 2 women more or less exclusively on their runways and in their ads. What's seen on the runways and in magazines in turn trickles down into department stores and mass retailers, and leaves plus-size women with a smaller, much more limited selection. (Pipia 2015)

For me, especially before more plus-sizes became available, it was difficult to find cute clothes that fit my body especially as it got bigger in my late 20s. Tim Gunn, who is featured on *Project Runway* as the designers' mentor, wrote in a 2016 *Washington Post* Op-Ed echoing my experience,

> Have you shopped retail for size 14-plus clothing? Based on my experience shopping with plus-size women, it's a horribly insulting and demoralizing experience. Half the items make the body look larger, with features like ruching,

> box pleats and shoulder pads. Pastels and large-scale prints and crazy pattern-mixing abound, all guaranteed to make you look infantile or like a float in a parade. Adding to this travesty is a major department-store chain that makes you walk under a marquee that reads “WOMAN.” What does that even imply? That a “woman” is anyone larger than a 12, and everyone else is a girl? It’s mind-boggling. (Gunn 2016)

When fat women have limited clothing options, it further marginalizes us in our careers and social lives because it is assumed that we have no regard for our physical appearances - something that is already an assumption made about fat women because of our body fat. Then, when we show up to work or a social event with childish and/or frumpy-looking clothes on, it is even more difficult for us to make headway in professional and social situations. Blogger Melissa McEwan writes about this on her blog *Shakesville,* and she says,

> Fat women can't "get away with" being unstylish at all, especially in a corporate workplace, if they want to be regarded as intelligent and capable. In a well-tailored (and thus expensive) business suit, I'm a Woman to Be Reckoned With. In sweatpants and a t-shirt, I am literally spoken to as though I might be mentally disabled. (That's not an exaggeration and not meant to be funny.) That happens to all women, and all people, to some degree. But the fatter I've gotten, the wider the gap in perceptions of me grows. (McEwan 2010)

When I became definitively plus-sized, around 2009 or so, I resigned myself to dressing like a frumpy grandma because of how few options existed in fat women's fashion. It was a sad realization when I had moved into a new category of clothing where everything seemed so drab and ugly. People started treating me differently, too - there was a noticeable shift in the ways strangers and acquaintances alike looked at and dealt with me.

Once, when I went to Victoria's Secret, looking for a bigger bra when I started to outgrow my old ones (after shopping there for years), I was told that they "didn't sell items for people like me." It's embarrassing to be told that you're too fat for "regular"

clothing, and in order to function as a worker and "normal" person in society, one must be somewhat presentable in terms of clothing. Especially for fat women - who mostly have big breasts - bras to cover their breasts are absolutely mandatory in public and professional life. Mostly I wish I could just wear leggings and tank tops everywhere I go, but I don't think this would fly when I am up at the head of the classroom or as I give academic presentations. In a society where appearance for women is of immense cultural importance, clothing becomes essential in order to be successful in most professional and social situations.

Tipton's work on *Project Runway* and her victory over the other designers was an important step for fat women's visibility in fashion. The hosts' and judges' support of Tipton as she created plus-size clothing for the show is unusual in the fashion world. Tipton's success gave bigger-sized runway models new opportunities, as well. The judges, during the season finale when Tipton was announced the winner, emphasized the importance of her "inclusive" clothing, commending her for "taking risks" by making plus-sized designer clothes, particularly crop-tops for bigger women which exposed their mid-sections.

Tipton is also Mexican-American, and her clothing collection for the *Runway* finale was inspired by 1950s Mexico City. So not only was Tipton's presence important for fat women's visibility, but also for Mexican-Americans. Her collection featured pastels, flower crowns, and lots of hand-dyed lace. The clothes are hyper-feminine, which speak to the desire of some plus-sized women to emphasize their femininity in the face of anti-fat attitudes. In contrast, the other two women finalists featured on *Runway* designed

clothes that were more tomboy-ish, with leather, sneakers, and a noticeable lack of pastels. Tipton also made a deal with JCPenny, and *USA Today* reported in 2016 that

> [Tipton] partnered with JCPenney as a brand ambassador for Boutique+, a new line designed specifically for plus-size customers. It will be available in 500 stores in sizes 0x to 4x, and on jcp.com in sizes up to 5x starting in May, with prices from $12.99 - $60. JCPenney is also debuting an in-store shop called "The Boutique" that will include a variety of brand names, including Tipton's line coming this fall. (USA Today)

Tipton's presence and victory on *Runway* made some space for fat women a place in high fashion. However, there are some who think she won simply because of her difference. Tim Gunn, in his 2016 *Washington Post* Op-Ed, says of Tipton and her work:

> This season, something different happened: Ashley Nell Tipton won the contest with the show's first plus-size collection. But even this achievement managed to come off as condescending. I've never seen such hideous clothes in my life: bare midriffs; skirts over crinoline, which give the clothes, and the wearer, more volume; see-through skirts that reveal panties; pastels, which tend to make the wearer look juvenile; and large-scale floral embellishments that shout "prom." Her victory reeked of tokenism. One judge told me that she was "voting for the symbol" and that these were clothes for a "certain population." I said they should be clothes all women want to wear. I wouldn't dream of letting any woman, whether she's a size 6 or a 16, wear them. A nod toward inclusiveness is not enough. (Gunn 2016)

Gunn highlights the challenges of normalizing stigmatized identities in his piece. It is difficult to avoid claims of tokenism when something is unprecedented, as was Tipton's presence and work on the show. Anything "new" can be interpreted as tokenism, simply because of its difference. Similar to when students of color are accused of being token scholarship winners - not because of their achievements but because of university quotas - people will aggressively challenge whether someone different "belongs" in a particular space.

During the reunion episode in which all of the competing designers come back to reflect on the season's goings-on, Gunn begins the episode by asking the other designers if they thought Tipton won simply because she designed plus-size clothing and it had never been done before. The designers looked around at each other uncomfortably, clearly unsure how to respond on-camera. Tipton also faced criticism from her fellow designers, and even though she won several challenges, some of the other women on the show seemed to band against her to try to get her "voted off" during an episode in which they were challenged to work as a group. The incident, which because of reality television editing tactics, could be contrived or based on real events and emotions, seriously resembled a high school battle between mean girls and the crying, outcasted fat girl. Whether the fighting was real or not, it highlighted Ashley's "otherness" in a way that reminded me of how miserable it was to be the fat girl in school. In Tipton's reality-TV journey, we can witness what it looks like to be the first and the only, and the issues she must face in order to get there.

Is the high fashion industry changing? Perhaps. It may be a momentary ripple or a more substantial shift. As I discussed in the section about consumer culture, capitalism, and fatness, it is unlikely that any change is due to genuine appreciation for fat bodies, and more likely that the amoral nature of capitalism facilitates market shifts when there is an underexplored market that can be tapped. In *Unbearable Weight,* Susan Bordo says, "Consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire, and it frequently drops into marginalized neighborhoods to find them." (Bordo 1993, 25) Individuals may have empathy for fat women as they try (and often fail) to find clothes that fit them and look nice, as Tim Gunn expressed in his op-ed, and

concern for "diversity" and "inclusivity" has become more popular in mainstream culture - perhaps allowing some space for the fat body in high fashion.

Even if people and companies do not care for the aesthetics of the fat body, it makes sense for them to care about selling clothes to fat women. As Pipia explains in her article about the plus-sized clothing market, the average American woman is size 14. Many women are bigger than size 14. It would be financially foolish to ignore the buying power of women who are not thin. As it pertains to *Project Runway*, the program recently incorporated plus-size models in the entirety of the season rather than just for one designer, as was the case for Tipton in season fourteen.

It seems that Gunn and company put their words into action - his op-ed challenged the fashion industry to include more women of size. In *USA Today* Tim Gunn says, "I've been wanting to do this for quite a number of seasons...to be blunt, the network has been quite nervous about it. The whole fashion industry is nervous, despite the fact that people are now talking about size inclusivity." (*USA TODAY* online) It is also possible that after so many seasons of the same, *Project Runway* is looking to increase their viewership with something a bit different from their typical competitions, and plus size designing is the way to do it. *America's Next Top Model* is also following this trend with plus-size model and judge Ashley Graham leading the charge. In an interview with E! News, she is quoted as saying that there should be more models of color and more plus-sized models on the runway.

Graham is somewhat of an activist in her own right: she posts pictures on her Instagram account of herself in a bathing suit without the typical Photoshop touch-ups (see image below) alongside the standard model fare, including glossy airbrushing.

Figure 5.11 Ashley Graham on Instagram

She was also featured on the cover of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition, which is typically reserved for the very slender. In response to comments that she is "brave" for showing her bikini-clad body complete with cellulite, she told the *Independent UK*, "It's exhausting to have to always talk about how 'brave' you are for getting into a bikini because your cellulite is hanging out." She is outspoken about her body positivity, continuing to say, "The worst question I get asked all the time is, 'How did you find the confidence to get into that bikini and get photographed and not get your cellulite retouched?'" She also posts pictures of herself working out and in exercise attire, like in this photo of her leaving the gym (see image below) which she captioned, "Why way to

the gun show? #curvyfit," showing that bigger girls exercise and are concerned with fitness, and these concerns are not the exclusive domain of the muscular and slender.

Figure 5.12 Graham on Instagram

Graham is an interesting and subversive figure in mainstream modeling and fashion, but part of me cannot help but wonder, as comedian Michelle Wolf recently said in her stand-up special: "They just figured out that men will masturbate to fat girls." Graham still has the ideal "thick[68]" figure, with bigger butt and breasts and less fat

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[68] Calling someone "thick" is typically used as a compliment, indicating that they are not super-skinny, and have some fat on their butt and breasts. It is often used to discuss women of color and their body shape, although not exclusively. The Huffington Post asked their Facebook community page about how users define thickness, and their responses can be found here: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/11/what-thick-means-to-women_n_7555654.html

One user claims the term used to refer to women "with an attractive ass-to-waist ratio" - indicating that it is not a person with a big stomach, but instead a woman with a bigger butt and smaller waist. Users also mentioned that this term varies depending on culture, and black women seem to embrace it more than white women. Another user says, "When

around her midsection. Compared to someone like Tess Holliday, who was recently featured on the cover of *Cosmopolitan UK* (see image below), Graham looks thick, but I hesitate to call her fat. By most standards, Holliday is fat.

Figure 5.13 Tess Holliday on Cosmo UK

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a black man uses thick to describe a woman, it's a compliment. When a white man says a woman is thick, it's an insult." This illustrates the racial difference in the ways people think about "thickness."

Her inclusion on the cover of *Cosmo UK,* although still sexualized to the extent that most magazine covers have, at their core, origins in the male gaze, feels much more revolutionary than Graham's thick thighs. Many fat girls, myself included, will never look like Graham, but Holliday is more accessible. The *Cosmo* cover, of course, did not come without controversy, as Piers Morgan responded on Instagram, "As Britain battles an ever-worsening obesity crisis, this is the new cover of Cosmo. Apparently we're supposed to view it as a 'huge step forward for body positivity.' What a load of old baloney. This cover is just as dangerous & misguided as celebrating size zero models." This kind of reaction is typical when fat girls are highly visible in public without apologizing or diminishing themselves: we are accused of "glorifying obesity" by just being ourselves without censor.

Some women reacted with joy, though, to Holliday's cover, as writer Sasha Brown-Worsham said on Twitter, "For some reason I burst into tears when I saw this. Maybe because I used to pore through women's magazines at a teen for HOURS of misery, imagining how much happier I'd be if I looked like them. I just pray this means my daughters won't waste so many formative minutes." This is where something like Holliday's cover differs dramatically from Graham's Instagram and Swimsuit Issue. Graham, while pushing the needle slightly (and importantly!), is still very much indicative of typical beauty standards, especially in today's popular culture moment which celebrates "thickness."

Holliday is decidedly outside of those bounds. Her fatness is fatness, not thickness. And particularly for those of us who will never have a small waistline, someone like Graham on the cover of your grocery store checkout line magazine is cold

comfort. Holliday, instead, appears on the cover with no pretense of "thick" or "curvy"; she is fat. I never thought I would see someone like her on the cover of a women's fashion magazine. It is worth mentioning, as well, that *Cosmo* is marketed towards women, while the Swimsuit Issue is marketed to men. Holliday's presence on a women's magazine seems to be intended more as a way to improve women's self-image, rather than Graham being positioned as fat girl maturbatory fodder for men who may think they're being open-minded.

5.8 Black Women's Role in Making Fat Fine

Black women have been instrumental in changing Eurocentric ideas about beauty, in regards to what can be considered beautiful. In her article on black women and beauty, Tracey Owens Patton says,

> According to Susan Taylor (*20/20*, 1998) editorial director of *Essence* magazine, African American women have not traditionally seen themselves represented positively in any mediated form, so African American women create their own standard of beauty. Because of this counter-hegemonic creation, there is a wider range of beauty norms among African American women and more acceptance of different body types and weights. (Patton 2006, 41)

Because black women have historically been shut out of white-created ideas about beauty, magazines like *Essence* emerge in resistance as a way to counter these dominant ideas about who can have a beautiful body. Although still subcultural, and mostly consumed and marketed to and for black women, the influence of culture producers like *Essence* are integral in creating space for fat, black women. *Essence* also seems to mostly resist fetishizing black women's bodies, as focus on big boobs and "booty" tend to do, even if unintentionally. *Essence* and its counterparts, like *Jet Magazine*, seem to resist

framing black women in terms of the "controlling images[1]" that Patricia Hill Collins articulates in her work, and instead seek to proliferate varied representations of black women's bodies - many of which are bigger bodies.

About *Essence* and its cultural influence, Jennifer Bailey Woodard and Teresa Mastin say, in the *Journal of Black Studies,* "*Essence* continues to give Black women varied images of themselves to look at and read about, images that appear only rarely in mainstream White publications, if at all. Its masthead proudly proclaims that *Essence* is the magazine 'for and about Black women and many Black women have an intimate, personal relationship with *Essence.*" (Woodard and Mastin 2005, 264-5) A look at *Essence*'s covers since its inception in 1970 do indeed show a varied group of women and men on the cover, and showcase black beauty in different forms. See below for some examples of these images.

Figure 5.14 Queen Latifah on the cover of Essence

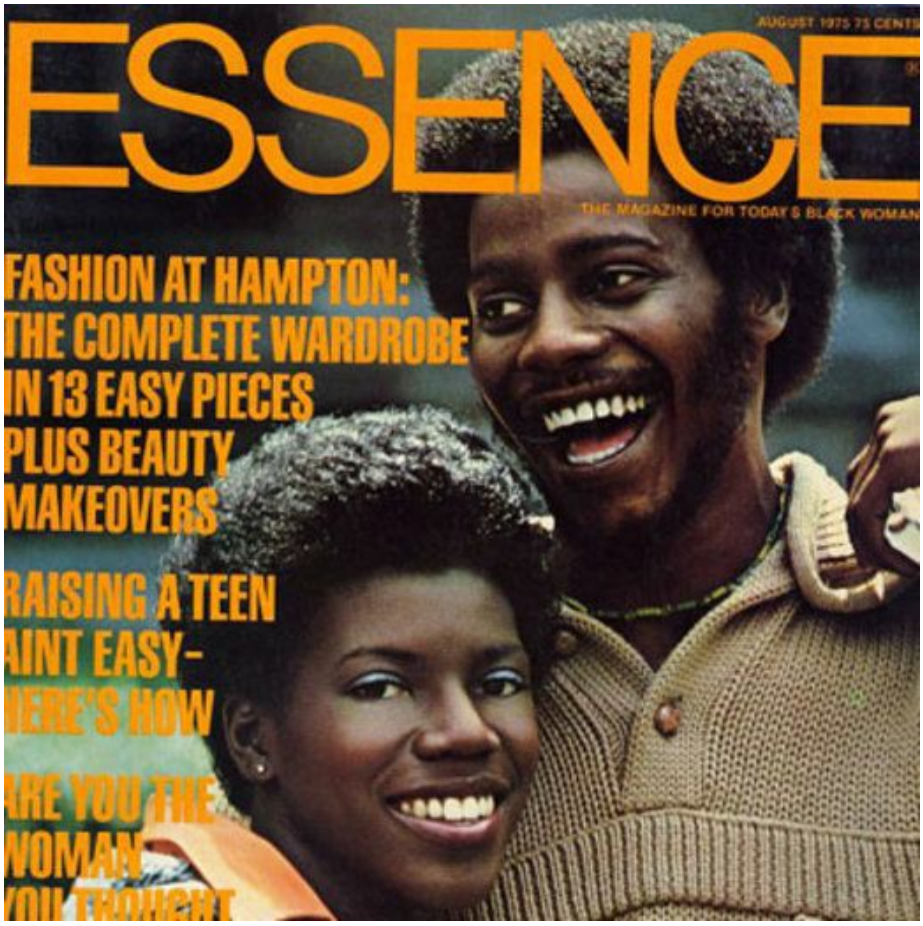

Figure 5.15 Essence magazine cover

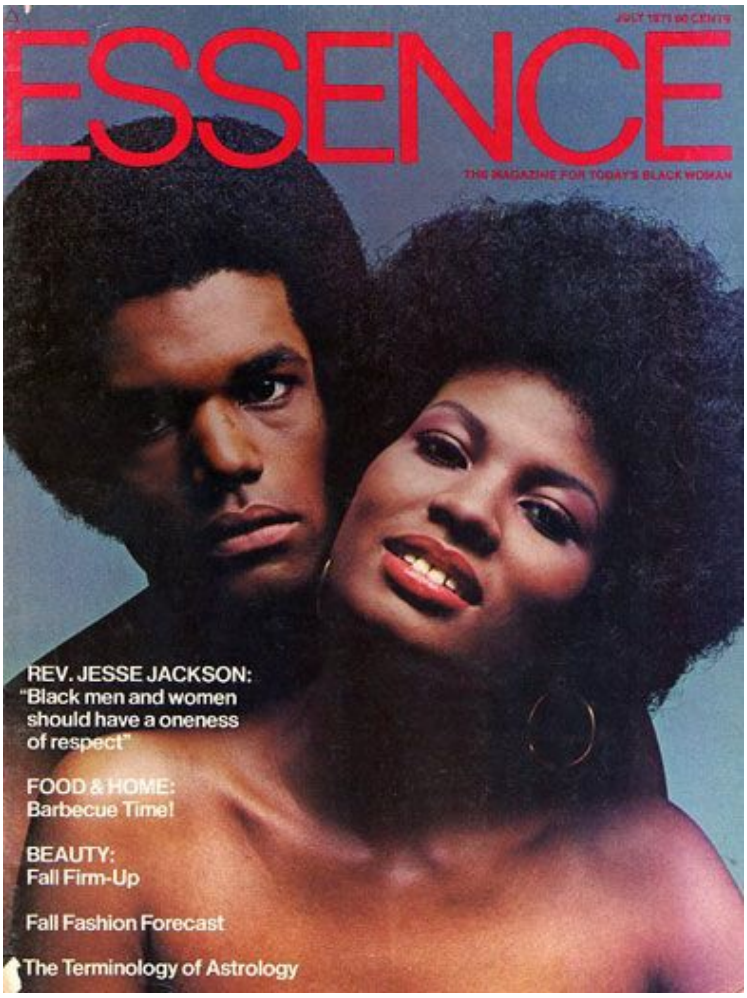

Figure 5.16 Essence magazine cover

Figure 5.17 Queen Latifah on the cover of Essence

Figure 5.18 Jill Scott on the cover of Essence

You can see in these images that not only are larger women like Jill Scott and Queen Latifah featured on the cover of *Essence*, but the magazine also featured black folks with natural hair on their cover, as well as dark-skinned black people - who were not typically featured in white-oriented fashion magazines, until perhaps more recently. These images challenge common stereotypes about black women by presenting them as glamorous and beautiful, rather than as mammies or jezebels. They also feature, as you can see above, black couples showing affection in ways not always visible to the white mainstream. On the cover featuring Jill Scott, the cover proclaims, "Black is beautiful," explicitly stating one of their goals in featuring black people in ways that resist Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Queen Latifah, especially in the first image, is not dressed in clothing that hides her big body, as fat women sometimes are. *Essence* also holds a yearly festival which features music, fashion, workshops, and speakers. Their online site featured the best "curvy" fashion from the 2017 festival (https://www.essence.com/festival/2017-essence-festival/curvy-street-style-essence-festival-2017/), featuring big women and their stylish outfits worn at the festival. *Essence* online also features a "curvy model of the month," one of whom can be seen below.

Figure 5.19 Essence's "curvy model of the month"

Compared to a look at the covers of *Cosmo*, seen below, *Essence*'s representations of black people and bigger black women vary dramatically from the typical skinny, white women celebrity covers.

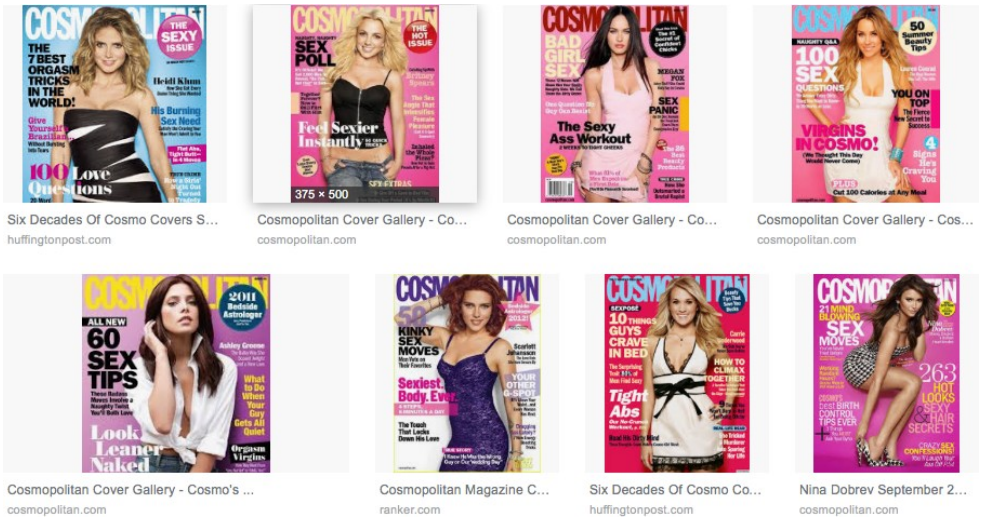

Figure 5.20 Cosmo covers

Ebony, another black woman-focused popular magazine, featured plus-size women on their cover in a 2016 issue titled "The Body Brigade." On the cover were undeniably big women (see image below) - including fashion blogger Gabi Gregg, also known as GabiFresh to her online followers, actress Danielle Brooks, and R&B singers Jazmine Sullivan and Chrisette Michele.

Figure 5.21 The Body Brigade in Ebony

Evette Dionne, writing for *Revelist.com*, says of the cover, "It shouldn't be unusual to see four beautiful plus size Black women slaying on a magazine cover, but unfortunately, it is." She continues to say, "This isn't the first time women of size have graced the cover of a major magazine, but this might be one of the only times that a magazine's gotten it right." She explains that big women are often featured in glossy magazines in ways that cover up their bodies, and she cites *Elle* magazine's choice to crop Gabourey Sidibe's face in a way that "completely hid her body." She also says that *Elle* chose other questionable ways to feature Sidibe, including "making her wear an ill-fitting weave" and by lightening her skin. The image is below, as well as an untouched image of Sidibe more representative of her actual skin tone.

Figure 5.22 Sidibe in Elle versus untouched image

Compare this to the way Sidibe is photographed for *Ebony*, in which her full body is shown and her skin looks darker.

Figure 5.23 Sidibe on Ebony's cover

For black women who are featured on the covers of (white) fashion or news magazines, it seems as though they must often be "softened"; for example, Sidibe's *Elle* cover and the somewhat infamous *Time* cover featuring Beyoncé in which she appears to have lighter skin and looks more waif-like than usual, prompting controversial criticism from feminist theorist bell hooks.

The "Body Brigade" *Ebony* cover does considerably less "softening" of the big-bodied black women it featured. All of the women are made up heavily, as is industry standard, but Danielle Brooks' dark skin seems to represent her actual skin tone accurately, and there appears to be no attempt to hide the women's fat bodies - instead, their bodies are clearly positioned as sexually alluring, in full-page view. The women look confident and self-assured on the cover, and all of them noticeably break with the "cover girl" stereotype. They are not highly sexualized, either, beyond wearing matching bathing suit bottoms and some push-up bras. They appear confident, but are not posing in highly sexual or degrading ways. They are allowed to be beautiful, while still presenting as self-possessed, in ways more typical of slender women who much more often grace the covers of magazines.

There is another element at work, here, too, in these representations of fat black women: the nurturing, maternal embodiment of fatness on black women, symbolizing care and support for those around her. This type of fatness is tangential to the mammy's asexual fat, but instead of serving white people, these maternal black women take care of people in their own community. Margaret Bass says, about this figure,

> ...the cook (who is always she) is a figure many African Americans of my generation would recognize. She is our mother or grandmother or dear family friend, and she believes that her meals are a gift to us - that the weight we carry

> often signifies that we have "made it." We no longer live in various states of deprivation. We do not look like "starving Africans." We can buy food. We can eat." (Bass 2001, 227)

Marvalene H. Styles also writes about this figure in African American communities, and she says, "Plumpness is a symbol of the wonderful job she is doing...A big body to the Black woman represents health and prosperity. The interrelatedness of the concepts 'big' and 'beautiful' is African. Bigness represents health and prosperity, but in American thinness is beautiful." (Styles 1997, 273) Racial, cultural, and economic differences all work to imbue fatness with these various meanings. Fatness signifies nurturance and success in these cases as explained by Bass and Styles, and perhaps even a rejection of white ideas via subcultural protectionism. If black women actively reject thin, white beauty standards for themselves and the people around them, fatness can function as a symbol of that rejection (see also Shaw). Genetics may also play a role here, as body size can vary by race.

Black celebrities have played an important role in the proliferation of counternarratives and alternative imagery of fat black women. Queen Latifah, who was the first black female star to be chosen as one of People magazine's "most beautiful people," is often hailed as a stylish, glamorous woman, and by some people, as plus size icon. Writing for *Bustle*, Amanda Richards says, "Looking back, I'm pretty sure that Queen Latifah was the first plus size woman I ever saw on TV. As a chubby kid in the '90s, spotting a fat woman in any form of media was like running smack into a beautiful unicorn you'd been dreaming of all your life." Queen Latifah is not just big, but also tall.

She started her own clothing line in 2011[69], hosted her own talk show for several years[70], was recently in the hit film *Girl Trip,* and seems to be able to make her way as a celebrity that does not fit the typical body or sexuality mold.

About her relationship with her body, Latifah told *US* magazine, ""I think I got to that place by not being happy with the other side — hating your body and criticizing yourself all the time. When I was around 18, I looked in the mirror and said, You're either going to love yourself or hate yourself. And I decided to love myself...That changed a lot of things." The music she made during the 1990s is full of feminist themes; on the track "U.N.I.T.Y" she yells, "Who you callin' a bitch?" in response to men catcalling her on the street. For *Bitch,* Evette Dionne writes about Latifah's character on the television show *Living Single*,

> Her size was a facet of her character, not the character itself. She had no qualms about it or any question about the amount of esteem she should have. In Khadijah, I saw who I thought I wanted to be. I wanted to navigate the world with confidence, precision, and ambition—in this body, unapologetically. I clung to Khadijah because she was so much different than what fat girls are typically fed in media.

Because fat women are so seldomly represented this way, Dionne clings to Latifah's Khadijah as a rare model for her future self. Latifah is regularly featured on the cover of *Essence* magazine (see images below), speaking to the ability for black women to cultivate and carve out different standards for beauty when they can.

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[69] see https://www.essence.com/2011/05/28/queen-latifah-plus-size-clothing-line-queen-home-shopping-network

[70] https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/queen-latifah-show-canceled-751244

Figure 5.24 Latifah on the cover of Essence

Actress Monique is also featured on covers of *Essence* and is outspoken about her fatness. In her stand-up routines, she pokes fun at "skinny bitches" saying they are "evil and should be destroyed" and asserts that fat women are better in bed. She claims "once you go fat, you never go back" in respect to sex, a play on the phrase "once you go black, you never go back." Her books, *Skinny Women Are Evil* and *Skinny Cooks Can't Be Trusted,* speak to her personal fat-positivity. Monique is often self-contradictory, though, as many of us are: she discusses how she is not interested in having sex with fat men, and recently lost a significant amount of weight.

But Monique does espouse fat positivity; for example, in *Skinny Women are Evil*, she writes, "Armed with a FULL stomach and a fuck-them-if-they-ain't-feeling-me attitude, I set out to destroy those who cause FAT folks turmoil, and help other BIG girls tired of hearing, 'Are you pregnant?' No, bitch. I'm FAT. It's finally time for us to get some respect. Take our place in the spotlight. Represent." (Monique 2003, 5) Monique, as is obvious from this selection of her writing, is unapologetic and assertive when it comes to demanding respect for fat people, especially fat women. She is also likely speaking to black women primarily in this book and in her comedy; her stand-up show audiences are predominantly black, although her message is applicable to all fat women. Her anger at "skinny bitches" is part joke, part reality, as many of us fat women know what it feels like to be the fat friend in a crowd of skinny girls. (It's not fun.) It's also

possible that her indictment of "skinny bitches" has a racial element to it: she connects skinniness to being high-maintenance in her act, attributing a kind of stuck-upness to skinny women. It's also interesting to see Monique's selective feminism; she obviously has a lot of ire for "skinny bitches," but in her comedy special "I Coulda Been Your Cellmate," Monique performs for prisoners in a women's facility, exhibiting compassion and solidarity with the women inside, relating to them and talking to them as peers and equals.

Monique also was a leading lady in *The Parkers* (see image below).

Figure 5.25 The Parkers

The program aired from 1999-2004 and featured a mostly black cast and centers around Monique's character Nikki Parker and her daughter, Kim, who decide to attend the same college. During the course of the series, Nikki pines for her professor, Stanley Oglevee, who is uninterested in her and even sometimes seems frightened by her assertiveness. During the five seasons, Nikki aggressively tries to win over the Professor's heart to no

avail. Nikki is always ready to make a pass at the professor, at any time, anywhere. She never gives up, despite his repeated (often very demeaning) rejections of her, and in a strange twist, "gets" the professor in the last episode of the series. She also gets her degree after leaving school for a prolonged period of time in order to raise her daughter by herself.

Monique's Nikki Parker subverts the tropes surrounding black single mothers who are framed as abject, poverty-ridden, "welfare queens" who scam the government in order to avoid working. Nikki is high-achieving and marries Stanley. All of her persistence and sexual aggression towards the professor is not her undoing. Instead, they fall in love and live happily ever after. Nikki Parker, in the end, gets what she wants: an education and a love story. For fat black women, this is a subversion of typical, mainstream representation of fat, black women; it changes the story we more typically see by giving Nikki her happy ending.

Missy Elliot was also a highly visible, plus-size black woman who made an indelible impression on me when I was younger. Missy's raps and songs were innovative; she remains ahead of her time as far as the music goes. I remember seeing her "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" music video on MTV when I was young, after it's release in 1997. In it, Missy dances and raps with confidence, and she goes against all the fat girl rules: for one, she wears a costume that is huge, black, and poofy - making her look much bigger than she actually was. Before this video, I'm not sure I'd ever seen a woman rap, for one, and I definitely never saw fat girls who made themselves look *fatter.* She also wears other items of clothing, like overalls and big baggy jackets and shorts, which I was told fat girls should always avoid. Her clothing emphasized her fatness instead of trying to hide it.

Missy was always presented as equal to the men around her; in "The Rain" video, she is shown dancing with (the formerly known as) Puff Daddy and hanging out with producer Timbaland - she appears more on the men's level than the dancers and other women in the video. She is flanked by male dancers in one scene, clearly the main attraction.

Missy never shied away from expressing her sexuality via her music, and was as braggadocious about it as any male rapper. In her hit song *Work It*, she challenges her sexual partner to "go downtown and eat it like a vulture" and mentions her skills in bed by saying, "if you got a big [elephant noise], let me search ya, and find out how hard I gotta work ya." Missy carries the tradition of being sexually confident that runs through rap history, and a mantle that lady rappers Nicki Minaj and Cardi B have more recently picked up as well. But Missy, at least in her early and mid career, was much fatter than either Nicki or Cardi. In her videos, she presents as more masculine, especially in contrast to the feminine backup dancers. She later developed Grave's Disease, and lost a significant amount of weight at her doctor's urging. The difference in her size between these two periods in her career is stark; she looks remarkably different after the weight loss and her body is showcased in much more heteronormative, traditionally sexualized way.

Missy existed at a unique nexus during the time when she was fat and famous: she was somewhat masculine, but still bragged about her feminine attributes (keep your eyes on my bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum) and heterosexual skills. In her music videos, she is clearly different from the women backup dancers, but not in competition with them for attention or men. She explicitly expresses support women who sell their bodies and sexuality for money, showing solidarity with sex workers. She has the swagger of Jay-Z,

but in a fat woman's body. She is a blend of hypersexual (but most certainly on her own terms) and masculine, and raps explicitly about heterosexual desire (she mentions looking for a big dick in *Work It*) - full of contradictions and resisting typical representations of fat black women.

Alternative hip hop artist Lizzo is also making space for fat black women in music (see image of Lizzo below). She celebrates her blackness in songs like "Coconut Oil," an homage to black skin care. In her videos and songs, she dances and bounces around, clearly also celebrating her big body. She encourages women to move on from men who do not treat them well in "Good as Hell," encouraging women, "If he don't love you anymore, walk your fine ass out the door," and her videos feature fat dancers behind her and all variations of racial and body diversity. In her song and video "Fitness," Lizzo dispels commonly-held ideas about fat women by singing that she is "working on her fitness" and proclaiming that she is "independent, athletic, I've been sweating, doing calisthenics" and in the video, red text flashes on the screen as she sings, "I don't do this for you." Lizzo walks the line between being very sexual in many of her songs but also making it clear that she is operating from a place of self-love and self-motivation, pushing back against the idea that fat women must exercise and improve themselves in order to make the people around them happy, and in order to look good for everyone else's enjoyment. Her second album is called "Big Grrrl, Small World," referencing riot grrl culture (with the alternate spelling of girl), and also referencing her fat positive standpoint. *Self* magazine talked to Lizzo about her fat positive journey, and she said, "“I used to want to be somebody else completely...After years of accepting myself and years of finding what worked for me and being healthy on the inside first, I looked up and I

was perfect to me." She is also not afraid to use the word "fat" to describe herself, and in the same interview said, "'Around seventh grade, I was like, 'Yeah, my ass is fat. What's good?'"

Lizzo also does the important work of broadening the conversation about body-positivity by taking it out of the realm of solely individualized feelings about oneself into a conversation about how marginalization of specific bodies functions in the culture. She was featured in *Teen Vogue*, where Phillip Picardi writes,

> But now with her considerable visibility, Lizzo's "self-love" no longer has to do with just the "self." "I've always stood up for the underdog and the underrepresented because I can't escape from that myself," she says. "I can't wake up one day and not be black. I can't wake up one day and not be a woman. I can't wake up one day and not be fat. I always had those three things against me in this world, and because I fight for myself, I have to fight for everyone else." (*Teen Vogue* online)

Lizzo's obvious political stance here makes her different from celebrities or other public figures who talk about "loving yourself" because she has an understanding that just "loving yourself" will not change the attitudes around us which make life harder for women, black people, and fat people. This is where many body-positive icons fail, by framing body image issues as simply an individualized problem (of not loving oneself). Lizzo takes an intersectional approach to understanding her own identity in the above quote, as well as uses it as a platform by which to do that "difficult work" of consciousness-raising.

Lizzo espouses self-love, yes, but she also acknowledges the culture which creates an atmosphere ripe for self-hatred. She says, in Teen Vogue, "Everyone shouldn't have to hit rock bottom to love themselves...That's just the society we're all unfortunately

born in — the one where you have to hit your worst and hate yourself in order to love yourself? Those laws only exist because self-hate is so prevalent. Body positivity only exists because body negativity is the norm." By presenting herself as an alternative to white, skinny, normative body standards, Lizzo does both the work of the personal and the political; she encourages self-love and provides herself as an example of it, as well as being critical of the systems that make that self-love so very difficult for so many of us.

Figure 5.26 Lizzo performing

Eliminating and reducing stigma associated with the fat body feels incredibly daunting. It seems, for every positive or nuanced representation that emerges, there is a *Mike and Molly* to contend with. As I've shown in this chapter, visibility alone does not necessarily reduce stigma, especially when fat people are written and portrayed in stereotypical, degrading ways. There is a fine line between representing the discrimination and self-loathing experienced by many fat people, and representing them

as hapless losers. Representation alone cannot create a new reality in which fat people are considered equal and valuable. But it can be a tool by which fat people's actual stories and voices are featured, therefore creating a more full picture of fat folks' realities. There are people who are fat and in love, fat and successful, fat and competent, and fat and intelligent, but fat girl stories of triumph are not featured in popular media as frequently as stories of abjection.

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Writing this has been both traumatic and liberating. Traumatic in that I've been mining my pain for the last few years in order to produce this work. Liberating in that I've been able to put my pain on the page, and get it outside of myself.

As I've talked with people about this project, and when I tell them about the ideas I am working with, I usually garner two variations of responses: one, the person has experienced something similar to what I describe here, if they are fat. This typically leads to a long conversation about the ways fat people are treated, as well as discussion about how vital it is to have cathartic conversations with one another. Most people then say something like, "I never talked about this with anyone" or "no one really understands what it's like." Once the topic is broached, fat people have so much to say about the ways they are treated and represented. But it takes a certain kind of prompting in order to have this kind of conversation.

I recently spoke about this with a student who is going into nursing. We talked about what it is like to be fat in our culture, and the ways people treat us and talk to us. She sent me an email, after our conversation, saying, "I want to thank you for the

conversation after today's class. It truly felt liberating to be just able to speak to someone about some things I found to be wrong with the health system and the way women are just portrayed in the media. I can't always easily express these things but I loved how welcoming you were with just listening and also giving feedback of your own." In my current undergraduate women's studies class, we are not talking about fatness per se, but she and I are both fat and ended up discussing our fat girl issues after class.

Her email makes me wonder about introductory-level women's studies classes and "feminism 101" more generally. How often do we discuss the ways fat girls and women experience a fat-hating culture in these courses? When I was an undergrad, taking women's studies classes, issues of fatness never came up. How is it that this thing that comes to define us, this weight we carry around, causing us to be discriminated against, disliked, and maligned, never came up in a women's studies class? Fatness does not seem to be considered in feminist, intersectional conversations in the same ways race, class, gender, and ability are. In these courses, I felt disconnected from the course material because my physical reality was rarely, if ever, addressed. We sometimes talked about more general concepts of "body image," but I found myself bothered by the skinny girls in the class who bemoaned their body dysmorphia and disordered eating. My body and its cultural meanings seemed more like a side note to their pain - perhaps something I deserved because I did not keep myself in "good shape."

I also find that conversations about fatness emerge across racial and economic class lines, which makes me wonder even further why we don't discuss it, especially in feminist spaces. The young women in my classes are as eager as ever to discuss pressures to be thin, despite "heroin-chic" no longer being the dominant fashion trend. Instead, I

find myself discussing the Kardashians with my students and the unhealthy and unrealistic body expectations the Kardashian/Jenner clan create and profit from. Fatness is still something they are deeply afraid of, and many of them work hard to ensure they are not fat. The ones who are fat, when they do speak up in class, are full of shame about their fatness and their inability to become thin. One young woman started sobbing in our class discussion because of how much she hated her body and because of all the problems that stemmed from it.

Another type of reaction I get, usually from thin people, is disbelief and anger. They want me to "prove" that fat women are treated badly, and they are angry that I focus on such "negative" representations. For example, at a recent academic conference in which I presented about the fat girl archetypes described in this project, I was interrogated by an older, thin white woman who asked me, seemingly irritated by my research, why I was "focusing on all the negative" in terms of fat women's representations. She thought I should focus on "all the positive representations" of fat women instead. When pressed for specific examples of more positive examples, she cited the film *Precious* as a fat girl triumph story, and did not mention anything else.

I've often been accused of "focusing on the negative," from my family as well as by people like the woman at the conference. But when you only see yourself reflected back in such distorted ways, such inaccurate ways, in ways that make it so difficult to think of yourself as worthy and loveable? I can't help but focus on the negative, not because I want to revel in it, but because I want to change it. I want to unearth these nasty ideas and banish them to the ends of the earth, so that fat girls and women of the future can have an easier time living than I have.

Ever since I was a teenager and starting getting chubby and fat, I thought I was a problem. I was told I was a problem, by the people who were supposed to love me the most, as well as by doctors, friends, and the general public. This project is my way of saying: no, I am not the problem.

The problem lies instead in our culturally-embedded ideas about women, our ideas about fatness, and the ways they work together to create such hostility and anger towards fat women. Working on this project, although difficult and often traumatic, ultimately helped me understand that I do not need to hate myself anymore. I do not need to apologize for existing. I do not need to take up less space. I am not the problem, and to every "fat girl" reading this, I am here to tell you: neither are you.

APPENDIX: FAT STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP

When I think of all of the times "feminist" conversations made me feel invisible, I can only think of bell hooks' sentiment in "Theory as Liberatory Practice," in which she opens, "I came to theory because I was hurting - the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory a location for healing." (hooks 1994, 59)

Over the years, books about fatness have come and gone, pointing out our prejudices in terms of body size but receiving little acclaim or fanfare. For example, Ruth Raymond Thone's *Fat: A Fate Worse Than Death?* examines women and weight prejudice by integrating her personal journey with cultural analysis and interviews. Similarly, W. Charisse Goodman's book *The Invisible Woman* examines weight prejudice in the US, taking on issue such as fat women and sexual objectification, fatness and health, and stereotypes about fat women. These books are not always easy to find, however. Despite my extensive study in the field, it took some digging to discover these texts. I find this indicative of how we treat fat women in our culture. The more we, as writers and scholars, try to shine a light on fat prejudice, the more we are pushed to the margins - our stories erased.

Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression is another text that it took me nearly ten years to come across, and I only discovered it because I was "following the citations" in a fat studies article, down an Amazon.com rabbit hole. I wonder what it would be like to discover these texts as easily as one would find a James Patterson novel at the local bookstore or at a Barnes and Nobles. How would that have changed my life, if I could have found texts that addressed my pain like this? For so long, I felt alone and alienated because of how people treat my body. Now I know I was intentionally isolated, these narratives obscured from my view.

This changed when I discovered the anthology *The Fat Studies Reader*, a text which gave fat studies some academic and institutional legitimacy (although there are still many people who dismiss the area of study, even among scholars who focus on identity issues), and it provides an overview of fat studies perspectives but in short articles on varying topics. The anthology is a milestone in terms of academic work on the fat body, but does not allow for the same kind of in-depth analysis a book or dissertation can. Thus I build on the work that began with the release of this important text.

Other (recent) books like Jes Baker's *Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls* address fat womanhood specifically, and take on fat-hating cultural elements, but seems to be aimed more specifically at helping fat women improve their self-image. Baker's work comes out of a new, exciting subculture of body-positive activism on the Internet. Online writing and activism has made these kinds of conversations more accessible, and is how I became immersed in the ideas. Now, one does not need to hunt down an obscure text from a small printing press in order to be exposed to ideas about fatness and cultural construction. Texts like Baker's offer cultural analysis, but seem more aimed at self-help

for fat women - ensuring them that they are not alone in their plight. The importance of this work (online and in print) cannot be understated. Solidarity and consciousness-raising are key in feminist activism, and cannot be accomplished if one thinks she is alone in the world. Texts like Baker's and Lindy West's *Shrill,* do the important work of walking the fine line between the personal and the political.

Lindy West, as she recounts in *Shrill,* started her writing career at the alternative paper *The Stranger*, based in Seattle. Before *Shrill* was published, she also gained notoriety online as a fat-positive activist and writer. In *Shrill*, she combines memoir, comedy, and cultural analysis to expose cultural anxieties about fatness. She says,

> As a kid, I never saw anyone remotely like myself on TV. Or in the movies, or in video games, or at the children's theater, or in books, or anywhere at all in my field of vision. There simply were no young, funny, capable, strong, good fat girls. A fat man can be Tony Soprano; he can be Dan from *Roseanne* (still my number one celeb crush); he can be John Candy, funny without being a human sight gag - but fat women were sexless mothers, pathetic punch lines, or gruesome villians. Don't believe me? It's cool - I wrote it down. (West 2016, 3)

She then goes on to chronicle all of the fat woman characters she was exposed to as a child - those characters which told her what she could and could not be. The examples she provides are grim: Lady Kluck (the fat chicken sidekick to Maid Marian in Disney's *Robin Hood*), The Queen of Hearts, Miss Piggy, the Trunchbull from *Matilda*, among other less-than-ideal role models. Since the publication of *Shrill,* West was featured on a fat-themed episode of *This American Life* (Roxane Gay was also interviewed for this piece), and the streaming website *Hulu* reports that it is in the process of making *Shrill* into a television series featuring *Saturday Night Live's* Aidy Bryant.

One one hand, texts like West's and Baker's are exactly the feminist intervention needed as we attempt to grapple with the ways sexism and fat-hatred interact. On the

other hand, some of what is written about fatness (especially recent scholarly work) addresses fat bodies as if they are all treated the same. Thus, a feminist theoretical intervention is needed to distinguish the ways in which sexism informs the ways we understand masculine fat and feminine fat, which is what I do here. Some texts focus on gendered experiences specifically, such as *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma* by Jason Whitesel. Whitesel addresses, importantly, the issues fat gay men face in thin-obsessed gay subcultures.

Or, for example, a text such as *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* by Sander Gilman takes on cultural narratives about fatness, but does not specifically look at the narratives about fat women. Much of Gilman's work is generalizable, but not all of it. For example, he discusses the problematic language about "obesity" as epidemic (i.e., something you can "catch"), fatness and ethnicity, as well as popular culture narratives about fatness (he cites Falstaff as an important example). However, in a sexist society, with a man-centered history, men will get most of the coverage, inevitably, in a text like Gilman's. He focuses on William Banting, famous for his weight-loss efforts, Shakespeare's Falstaff as "medical phenomenon," and the "fat boy" as depicted in literature.

Gilman examines what we understand fat to represent, rather than calling for fat acceptance. He takes on fat as pathology: the concept that fat is infectious and contagious, something to be feared, like SARS or the avian flu. He questions what it means to experience, culturally, an “obesity epidemic.” After all, it is assumed that whatever epidemic we happen to experience, the disease is one that can be “caught”. The work Gilman does largely focuses on historical material and literature; he first frames the

conversation historically and then shows us examples from literary texts. He highlights Dickens and the "fat boy" in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* as a common trope when it comes to fat people and representation. He distinguishes between the "jolly fatso" and the "sick fatty" in Dickens, the "fat boy" being the latter. Gilman says of the "fat boy", "he…is defined in the novel by his blank expression, huge appetite, and ability to avoid work by falling asleep instantaneously." (48) Gilman continues

> we are presented the stereotype that fat men…move their buttocks comically (like an animal) and they are lazy, falling asleep whenever they cease moving, as a sign of their almost medieval sinful sloth and stupidity. [Dickens' character] is *seen* as fat, and fat means that he is mentally 'slow' and without appropriate emotional responses. (48)

We see similar representations today: Homer Simpson embodies much of what Dickens' character did. Gilman establishes that these tropes are centuries in the making, and accomplish very specific cultural ends.

One of those ends is the stripping away of fat people's sexuality. Gilman continues to use the example of the "fat boy" to show that fat also means asexual, or at least a sexuality that is not normal. Sexual dysfunction and obesity are often linked[71]; in this case, because the "fat boy" is so mentally incapable, he is sexually incapable as well. Gilman does not examine the treatment that fat women are given in respect to sex; in fact, he rarely gives a nod to women at all. Gilman also examines the stigma of the fat body, using self-representations, such as William Banting's 1863 *Letter on Corpulence Addressed to the Public*. Banting chronicles the "'… sneers and remarks of the cruel and injudicious in public assemblies, public vehicles, or the ordinary street traffic…[one]

[71] see Varney, Sarah. *XL Love: How the Obesity Crisis Is Complicating America's Love Life*. Rodale, 2014.

naturally keeps away as much as possible from places where he is likely to be made the object of the taunts and remarks of others." (81) Banting became a symbol, Gilman says; he was touted later as a success story when he lost some weight and published his "success story." So, Gilman shows us that the "reformed fatty" on NBC's *The Biggest Loser* is no new phenomenon.

Gilman chronicles fat as an "ethnic problem", one that justifies sanction against specific peoples. He shows us anti-fat sentiment linked with anti-Semitism. Moral panic around obesity, during the late 1800s, led to claims about the "Jewish predisposition to diabetes." (105) This claim fit cleanly within conversations regarding "clean races", eugenics, and scientific racism and was used as reason to further discriminate against and socially punish Jewish people. This phenomenon mirrors the current panic about Black men and women regarding diabetes. Instead of examining systemic poverty and structural oppression, Black men and women are often blamed for being fat and/or having diabetes.

Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture focuses on fat stigma in the US. Amy Farrell gives us historical perspective on fat hating. She contends that fat stigma during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was linked to "the excesses of industrialization and consumer culture within modernity." (18) Sander Gilman explains the "globesity" phenomenon; a trend that would have the US exporting fat, as well as goods and ideas. Weight indicates, to some, a greediness particular to the developed world. Farrell also chronicles the "privilege" to be fat, as fatness in respect to personal wealth and size were understood, before the industrial revolution, Farrell says, to be markers of the upper class. This argument is still used when it comes to less developed nations and their attitudes towards fat. However, whenever I see people making this

assertion, they are usually talking about men, fat, and perceived power. I rarely see the fat equals (economic) power argument chronicled in scholarship when it comes to women, although the argument is often universalized in respect to gender. Therefore, fat men are afforded more subjectivity and agency in a sexist society, even *despite* their physical size, whereas for women who are often judged solely on their physical appearance, the same rules do not apply.

Farrell documents the shift from fat equals rich and powerful to fat equals poor and out of control. She claims that fat hatred began to emerge in an especially powerful way, as did the "construction of hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class." (18) Farrell continues, "the project of civilization meant not just racialization and gender and sexual hierarchies, but also the construction of certain body types as superior and others as inferior." (18) Again, as Gilman observed, we can understand fat stigma as a type of racism and xenophobia, as a way to further stereotype and discriminate against people of color. The eugenics movement plays no small part in this construction.

More currently speaking, the divide between fat feminists and mainstream feminists is, sometimes, overwhelming to me, as a fat activist and scholar. Farrell examines the root of this chasm, framing her argument in terms of female citizenship. When first-wave feminists were fighting for the right to be recognized as citizens, she claims, they were hesitant about including women who did not exemplify "normative citizenship." This, of course, included black women but also, as Farrell shows, includes fat women. She claims, "19th-and early 20th-century suffragists…needed to prove theirs were indeed 'civilized' bodies, to the workingmen of the 1920s and 1930s who were seeking to carve out a space of upward mobility." (19) Thus, any bodies classified as

"uncivilized" (read: bodies of color and fat bodies) were not worth fighting for, as they could "weaken" the movement. Farrell contends that fat hatred remains in the modern-day feminist movement, as these sentiments persist. This construction affords thin women a certain amount of subjectivity and agency in a society that deems them largely "acceptable" in comparison to their fat counterparts.

Another popular stereotype and way of representing fat people, the "morally corrupt" fatty looms large in the Western collective imagination, conjuring images of mob bosses and sexually loose women. Think Monica Lewinsky, Chris Christie, or Rob Ford. Farrell examines this trope and examines the construction of this archetype, as well as illustrating the connections between respectability politics and fat: she uses Barack and Michelle Obama's thinness and focus on health, wellness, and eating habits as imperative for the first Black president and first lady. Farrell closes with a nod to fat activists and those who have rejected the notion that they are worthless because of their fat bodies. She pays attention to Marilyn Wann's *FAT!SO?Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!*, a readable, accessible, fun guide to eliminating one's own fat hatred, of themselves and others. Texts like Wann's attempt to bridge activism and scholarship and make room for public conversations about fat bodies.

Also walking the line between activism and scholarship is the 2009 text *Lessons From the Fat-o-sphere,* in which authors Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby request that readers "Quit Dieting and Declare a Truce With Your Body." The women are well-known fat activists and have online blogs in which they expose the everyday fatphobia that permeates the US. Many young scholars and activists (like me) are first exposed to radical ideas by way of the internet, and women like Harding and Kirby were very much

at the front lines. This book reads more like a "Fat Positivity 101", but it opens up the possibility for activism and scholarship for a new, younger audience. Many people come to fat scholarship and activism through some type of lived experience, be it a fat person who deals with discrimination and self-hate regularly, or a person who has a sister, brother, wife, or mother who experiences fat hatred, or even someone who has gone from fat to thin and sees the vast differences in the ways that fat people are treated.

Lessons does address dating, but less specifically sex. The authors briefly touch on fat people finding partners and cultural issues with fat fetishism, but do not make the leap to discussing fat sex. As is shown by this review, there is very little scholarship done on fat sexuality and attraction. Assumedly, fat people are indeed having sex, but you would never know it from the literature. The beauty of a text like Harding and Kirby's is its informal tone and accessible presentation. Harding, Kirby, and other public intellectuals like Melissa McEwan (of *Shakesville,* an online blog and community) make dense, philosophical, often difficult ideas easier to understand for the newcomer.

Released in 2013, and one of the more current academic texts on the subject, *What's Wrong with Fat?* by Abigail Saguy, takes on the very framing of fat as a social and personal problem. Saguy approaches fatness by drawing on other sociologists' theories, namely Erving Goffman's use of conceptual frames. She utilizes his theories as a way by which to understand the ways fatness is understood in today's context. Saguy examines the various frames by which fatness and fat people are represented; for example, she examines the "medical frame" and says, in respect to her work,

> [T]he term *obesity* implies a medical frame…[and]…[a] medical frame implies that fat bodies are pathological. It has become so pervasive and taken-for-granted in the contemporary United States and elsewhere that most people do not even realize that it is a frame and that there are alternative ways of understanding

> fatness, as, for instance, beautiful, sexy, healthy, or a positive form of human diversity. (5)

Here Saguy does what many fat activists are doing and have done for years: not just advocate for tolerance of fat bodies, but for the complete re-envisioning of how we culturally understand fat. In using Goffman's theories and examining each "frame" through which fat is understood, Saguy works to change the ways we conceptualize fat. While other texts and activists come from the perspective of creating space for fat people and working to reduce discrimination, texts and voices like Saguy ask that the reader challenge everything they think they know about fat. In truth, texts like hers are not as much of a cultural commentary as they are an attempt to dislodge and de-center the "facts" and "knowledge" we hold so dear, particularly when it comes to medicine and science. The text takes on the notion that medical science is always "fact", and by that distinction, immutable and indisputable. She questions the institutions that produce and give us, as a society, these facts to which we cling so tightly. Saguy appropriately makes connections between scientific racism of the past and the cultural moment defined by the "obesity epidemic", wherein we currently reside.

The title of Saguy's book says it all. She bravely questions the foundations on which all of our understandings about fat are built. This text is as much an attempt at activism as it is a work of scholarship. The impacts of fat discrimination and fat stigma are literally killing fat people, be it through physician misdiagnosis, inadequate medical equipment, or fear of discriminatory treatment on the part of fat patients. An attempt to gain a new understanding of fat and the cultures that produce what fat means can not only change one's quality of life, it can also be an actual lifesaver.

Saguy also pays attention to race, class, and gender differences in her text, something not universal to all fat studies. She also questions the various excuses that are made for fat peoples' existences, be it genetics/biology (born this way), society (lack of healthy food, exercise opportunities), or personal responsibility (fat as a moral and personal failing, you eat too much and are lazy, etc). Saguy does not take any of these reasons for granted, as many fat scholars and activists do, by relying on biology or society's pitfalls as a way to justify the very existence of fat people.

In *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West*, Peter Stearns strays from the gender studies/feminist perspective common in fat scholarship and approaches fat history from a more removed, traditionally historical perspective. Stearns explicitly states that he has no interest in suggesting solutions for fat hatred and discrimination. He instead examines cultural artifacts from France and the United States in order to trace the animosity towards fat and its historical roots. Many of the more recent books written on fat approach fat from a "something needs to change" point of view, or at least a "this is not okay" angle. Stearns rejects a specific position on the matter in favor of simply presenting the history of fat.

The anthology *Bodies Out of Bounds*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, contains works by cultural theorists and focuses primarily on "Fatness and Transgression." The text is oft-cited; published in 2001, it is one of the first of its kind to directly address fatness and the social mores surrounding the subject from a distinctly gender studies and humanities perspective. The articles and essays within the text work to deconstruct attitudes towards fat bodies and examine the ways in which these bodies are culturally produced as and understood as pathological. For example, the authors take

particular issue with "psychology-based works [that] conceptualize the body as a blank slate onto which the psyche's contents are transcribed or written. In this paradigm, the fat body is the symptomatic body." (4) The authors also challenge the weight-loss industry and the outrageous amounts of money that are used to reduce fatness and transform fat people into skinny ones. The intersection of capitalism and anti-fat ideology is a vital one, and one that is only minimally explored by scholars.

Bodies Out of Bounds also works to address an issue prevalent in fat studies and women's and gender studies: erasure of people of color and those from "developing", non-Western nations. The vast majority of scholarship on fat bodies focuses on white bodies; fat feminism and fat positivity fall prey to the same white supremacy that dominates the West and the United States. Current and existing scholarship on fatness largely relies on the "mix-and-stir" model when it comes to marginalized identities. *Bodies Out of Bounds* features "Oscar Zeta Acosta's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*: A Fat Man's Recipe for Chicano Revolution" by Marcia Chamberlain, but nothing with an explicit focus on women of color.

The only text that explicitly and obviously centers women of color in the conversation about fat is *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* by Andrea Elizabeth Shaw. Shaw's work takes a political and decidedly feminist tone in observing the ways in which fat, black, female bodies are understood and recognized, particularly politically. Shaw discusses the ways in which the black female body is expected to conform to white, Western European norms and the social, economic, and physical punishments that are enforced when one does not meet these standards. The book takes on the often ignored role of racialization in the social construction and

production of fat bodies, primarily drawing on cultural examples, such as rapper Missy Elliot, Oprah Winfrey, and texts by Audre Lorde, Alice Randall, and Grace Nichols. The text frames the conversation in terms of conventional, normative historically recognizable beauty standards: the pageant. Shaw traces the racist history of the pageant, saying

> Black women were not permitted to participate in the Miss America contest until 1970, on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, and the first African American Miss America was not crowned until 1984 when Vanessa Williams won the contest…The unwritten regarding behavior and appearance demonstrate…that the contestants' physiological blackness must be ideologically effaced to render them as acceptable players in the beauty game. In some cases like Williams', her genetic heritage initiates the effacement process. As a biracial woman, her light skin and green eyes immediately denote a "reduction" in her blackness. And in the years since Williams' victory, subsequent black contestants and winners, even those who are darker skinned than Williams, all bear similarly European features such as high cheekbones, straight noses, relatively thin lips, and of course, slender bodies. (Shaw)

Shaw turns the conversation about beauty standards on its head by not centering the white, Western, thin, blonde, female body. Becky W. Thompson does this, as well, in *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*, by examining the ways eating problems manifest in girls of color. Most of the above-mentioned texts do not examine the sexual stereotypes central to my project.

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